The Portola district is reclaiming its rich urban-agricultural heritage that once included 19 commercial nursery blocks throughout the neighborhood. After decades of decline, the Portola and San Bruno Avenue have seen a renaissance in recent years as the community cultivates its historical identity as “San Francisco’s Garden District.” STORY ON PAGE 4

IN FULL BLOOM: SAN FRANCISCO’S GARDEN DISTRICT
The phrase “all good things must come to an end” came to mind as I sat down to write this on the last day of the de Young’s Summer of Love exhibit — which, for the record, I visited more than half-a-dozen times with a variety of family and friends! (It seems the fun experience had at this year’s Soirée was not enough for me.) Viewed from the perspective of fifty years of hindsight, there is little question the Summer of Love had a lasting impact on San Francisco and beyond.

With the theme of influence in mind, this issue of Heritage News recognizes the impact made by two recently deceased Heritage board members: Bruce Bonacker, a native of New York, and Bob Thompson, who hailed from Illinois. As measured by their commitment to Heritage and its mission to preserve and enhance the city’s unique architectural and cultural identity, they each loved their “adopted home” of San Francisco. Both served many years on Heritage’s Board of Directors, and Bruce served as Board Chair. Their passion and dedication were exemplary, as reflected in their being among the select ranks of the Lilienthal Society. It is with profound gratitude that we remember Bruce and Bob’s positive influence on the Heritage that exists today.

This issue’s cover story about the significance of the Portola (page 4), named by the Board of Supervisors as the city’s Garden District, is a prime example of Heritage’s dedication to recognizing the city’s rich cultural heritage in all its forms. To what degree will the Portola’s greenhouses and urban agriculture inform its future?

On a lighter and brighter note, I am extremely pleased to report the successful conclusion of the Campaign for San Francisco Heritage/Haas-Lilienthal House. Under the amazing leadership of co-chairs Alice Russell-Shapiro and David Wessel, the final tally has surpassed (albeit, slightly) the $4.3 million goal! A new chapter for the House begins with completion of seismic, life safety, and accessibility upgrades in addition to freshly renovated interior finishes and new interpretive programming by mid-October. We encourage you to visit the House before the year-end. Mayhem Mansion returns in late October, followed by Fred Rosenbaum’s lecture on “Jewish Americans: Religion and Identity at The Haas-Lilienthal House” on November 9th, and the Annual Holiday Open House and Holiday Victorian Teas in December. Refer to the Calendar on the back cover for specific dates!
In Memory of Bruce Bonacker and Bob Thompson

by Don Andreini

Two great and good friends of Heritage died this summer, within days of each other. Bob Thompson (1943-2017) and Bruce Bonacker (1947-2017) served long terms on Heritage’s board of directors. Of their combined tenures of 41 years, they were board colleagues for fifteen years.

Most people currently serving as board members or staff will never have known Bob. He worked for many years at the very heart of Heritage’s activity, as chairman of the Issues Committee (now Projects & Policy Committee). It is in that role that I came to know and work with him. I provided staff support to that committee under a succession of four executive directors—and during a one-year interregnum when we had no leader.

A noted real-estate attorney, Bob was more a moderator than leader of the Issues Committee, always seeking consensus among its members in evaluating projects that affected the city’s historic resources. Ever courteous and patient, he allowed the vigorous clash of opinions, while carefully and gently guiding discussion to some common agreement so that Heritage could present a firm and unequivocal position.

Bruce contributed frequently to those lively Issues Committee discussions. Of course, as you would expect, he always had a definite opinion on every project that came before the committee. Possessed of a good nature and a jolly laugh familiar to us all, he nonetheless never held back from asking project sponsors the hard questions.

I can only speak for myself, but I suspect others will have had this experience with Bruce. In a casual conversation with him I might offer an opinion on a subject or an explanation of what I thought was true. So often his response was a gentle but firm corrective opinion or explanation. I yielded to his superior knowledge and wisdom every time.

On a personal note: some 20 years ago, my husband Steven and I made the top bid on a silent-auction item that offered a free design consultation with Bruce. That session led to a project on which, I suspect, Bruce did not realize much of a profit.

We asked him to design a set of book shelves as a permanent installation in our condo. My one criterion was that the shelves should never, ever sag. Bruce met that requirement and more. We often joke that in the next great quake, those stout shelves and the walls to which they are firmly anchored will be the only part of our home still standing.

A tribute to Bruce, those shelves draw continuing admiration from visitors to our home, and, 20 years later, they have not sagged one bit.

Don Andreini, a member of the Heritage staff from 1987 until his retirement in 2008, performed a variety of tasks, including editing the newsletter.
In Full Bloom: San Francisco’s Garden District

Bordered by Silver Avenue, McLaren Park, and Highway 101 in the southeastern corner of the city, the Portola District is reclaiming its rich urban-agricultural heritage that once included 19 commercial nursery blocks throughout the neighborhood. Named after the Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portolà, the district’s main street is San Bruno Avenue, a multicultural marketplace of neighborhood-serving retail, local restaurants, produce grocers, and specialty food stores. After decades of decline, the Portola and San Bruno Avenue have seen a renaissance in recent years as the neighborhood cultivates its historical identity as “San Francisco’s Garden District.” This resurgent Portola pride manifests itself in myriad forms, from a new mural and garden off the Silver Avenue exit and new pocket park alongside Four Barrel Coffee at the end of Burrows Street, to restoration of the neon blade sign at the Avenue Theatre and lofty (and conflicting) aspirations for the Portola’s last-remaining nursery block, the former University Mound Nursery at 770 Woolsey.

In the early 1900s Jewish, Maltese, and Italian immigrant families began construction of the greenhouses that lent the Portola its name. (The Portola is one of the few neighborhoods in the United States that has a Maltese presence; at one time, about half the families in or near the Portola descended from Malta.) Located outside of the city center, the neighborhood boasted an unusual combination of natural and man-made assets, the former ranching land of McLaren Park, University Mound reservoirs, and the nearby Alemany Farmers Market, creating an environment unlike any other in San Francisco. The ridge of what is now McLaren Park creates a natural fog-break and sunny climate, and the natural watershed of Yosemite Creek provides irrigation and nutrients to feed plant growth. The neighborhood was once the primary source of cut flowers in San Francisco, with flowers grown in open fields and orderly rows of white-washed greenhouses spread throughout the neighborhood. Each nursery grew its own specialty flowers, such as azaleas, begonias, carnations, Easter lilies, French marigolds, orchids, poinsettias, roses, and snapdragons. Today, the Portola is overwhelmingly residential in character with very few physical markers of its floricultural heyday, with the notable exception of 770 Woolsey.
Over the past decade the neighborhood’s agricultural heritage has been revived and celebrated by community-led efforts such as the annual Portola Garden Tour, organized by resident Ruth Wallace and a host of volunteers each September, and the Portola Green Plan, published in 2015, that recommends improvements for enriching the public realm. The plan was spearheaded by The Greenhouse Project (TGP), a nonprofit dedicated to developing community assets that “cultivate the Portola’s identity as the Garden District.”

By unanimous resolution in October 2016, the Board of Supervisors officially declared the Portola “San Francisco’s Garden District” and endorsed the goals of the Portola Green Plan. This past April, the board adopted a second resolution, recommitting the city to urban agriculture and calling on city departments to evaluate parcels of land that could be well-suited to growing fruits and vegetables. Although the Garden District resolution explicitly calls out “the University Mound Nursery Greenhouses at 770 Woolsey Street” as one of “very few physical markers of [the Portola’s] agricultural history,” it offers no legal protections to assure its preservation. In fact, there is only one official City Landmark in the entire Portola District: the former University Mound Old Ladies’ Home, a Colonial Revival-style convalescent/nursing home built in 1931-32, designated San Francisco Landmark No. 269 in 2015.

Contested Ground: University Mound Nursery

Ernesto Garibaldi moved to San Francisco from Chiavari, Italy, around the turn of the last century. With the help of his brothers, he bought two blocks of property in the Portola and raised stalk flowers in the fields. Built in 1922 by the Garibaldi family, the University Mound Nursery grew heirloom varietals of roses in 18 hothouses at 770 Woolsey for sale throughout San Francisco, including the nearby Alemany Farmers Market. The glass-and-wood greenhouses operated until the early 1990s and were the last privately owned, actively producing commercial greenhouses in the city. Wild roses and blackberries can still be seen on the “Rose Factory,” as the Garibaldi nursery was once known.

Although the former University Mound Nursery has not been formally evaluated for potential historic significance, a summer intern with the Planning Department recently completed a preliminary study of the Portola District which included a discussion of the neighborhood’s floricultural heritage and the need for developing a preservation plan for the greenhouses and other remaining agricultural sites in the area. Despite its poor condition, the University Mound Nursery property remains virtually intact, including the original hothouses, steam house and smokestack, office, water tank, and irrigation infrastructure. For purposes of evaluating its potential significance as a cultural
lenscape, 770 Woolsey retains a high degree of physical integrity despite weathering and deterioration.

Over the past ten years, TGP’s central aim has been to develop 770 Woolsey as “an urban farm that is both financially and environmentally sustainable to the benefit of the Portola District and San Francisco at large.” In 2017, TGP published a 110-page feasibility study for development of a community asset at 770 Woolsey in partnership with SITELAB Urban Studio. The feasibility study evaluates and affirms the financial viability of a concept that includes five working greenhouses, a commercial farm, a community garden, a farmers’ market, events space, and a community center with commercial kitchen that would collectively occupy the entire site.

Many of the historic structures at 770 Woolsey would need to be reconstructed for any possible agricultural use. However, there are prominent local examples of landmark floricultural sites that have been partially rebuilt, such as the Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park (San Francisco Landmark No. 50) and the Sunny Side Conservatory on Monterey Boulevard (San Francisco Landmark No. 78). The City of Fremont recently approved a plan to create California Historical Nursery Park on the site of the historic California Nursery Company to tell the story of the emergence and evolution of nurseries in California. (Notably, treatment recommendations for California Historical Nursery Park, developed by PGAdesign and Carey and Company, A TreanorHL Company, call for limited reconstruction of certain building types and greenhouse structures.)

While TGP promotes its vision for reactivating 770 Woolsey as an agricultural hub and community asset, their hopes face one particularly vexing reality: TGP does not own the property. After more than a decade of negotiations with potential buyers, members of the Garibaldi family sold the 2.2-acre parcel to Group I in June 2017 for $7.5 million. Group I plans to construct 60 single-family homes that complement the existing residential character of the neighborhood. It is difficult to conceive how these competing visions for the property can be reconciled and coexist.

At the recommendation of Heritage, TGP is consulting with historian Donna Graves, who has experience preserving and interpreting Japanese-owned nurseries in the City of Richmond. Heritage staff has provided technical guidance to TGP over the past few years, but the Heritage board has not yet reviewed the Group I project or taken a formal position on the eligibility of 770 Woolsey as a historic resource. If determined eligible, the environmental review for any proposed development on the site would need to evaluate preservation alternatives.
Neon Renewal: The Avenue Theatre

Designed by the Reid Brothers in 1927, the Avenue Theatre is a modest Art Deco gem that has long anchored San Bruno Avenue, the neighborhood’s commercial corridor. For decades the large, decaying facade loomed over the street as evidence of its slow decline. Today, the theater’s survival and nascent revival perhaps best symbolize the surge in community pride and activism enveloping the Portola and reshaping its future.

Originally designed for silent pictures, the theater featured an orchestra pit to accommodate a Wurlitzer organ but quickly transitioned to talking pictures. Shuttered since 1984, the theater remains physically intact today, with the community having successfully spurned a 2013 proposal to lease the building to CVS for conversion into a chain drugstore. Despite some ill-advised alterations over the years, the original stage, carved moldings, decorative painted ceiling and wall murals, rows of wooden seats, and original projection equipment remain. The theater’s last tenant, a church, painted over some interior murals, and legend has it that actor Kevin Spacey bought the Avenue’s entry doors when the church deemed their depictions of topless nymphs too risqué for the congregation.

In 2015, the Portola Neighborhood Association approached the owner and offered to raise money to restore the Avenue’s darkened neon blade sign in exchange for the owner’s commitment to support the search for a tenant willing to preserve and reuse the theater. The owner also leased the theater’s storefront space, formerly occupied by Johnson’s Barbeque, to the neighborhood association at a heavily discounted rate for five years.

In close collaboration with then-Supervisor David Campos, the neighborhood association secured $250,000 in grants from Mayor Ed Lee and the Office of Economic and Workforce Development. An additional $20,000 raised by the neighborhood paid for restoration of the neon sign’s flashing sequence and the marquee’s original hanging letter system. Work on the sign commenced in spring 2017 and the scaffolding came down in late August. Mayor Lee and Supervisor Hillary Ronen were on hand for the relighting celebration on September 13, attended by over 200 neighborhood residents and friends.

As Portola residents reclaim and celebrate the history of San Francisco’s “secret neighborhood” (Chronicle), Heritage is eager to support their efforts through programs such as the Landmark Fund, which aims to ensure that the city’s historic landmarks and legacy businesses reflect the diversity of its people and places. Heritage will also closely follow plans for the former University Mound Nursery site, and will work to ensure that its floricultural past is honored and preserved in any future development of the site.
To celebrate the reopening of the Haas-Lilienthal House, historian and author Fred Rosenbaum shares his new research about the three generations of German-Jewish immigrants and their descendants, who built and lived in the Haas-Lilienthal House from 1886 until 1972, and how they helped transform San Francisco from a coarse boomtown into a world-class metropolis. Limited seating available, advance registration highly recommended.

Learn how the Historic Preservation Fund Committee (HPFC) was created in 2005 through the efforts of a small band of preservationists. Planning Commission President Rich Hillis will examine the origins, legacy, and future of the HPFC. An optional three-course dinner at the Metropolitan Club will be available immediately following the lecture. Dinner tickets are $65 per person, by advance registration only. In partnership with the 640 Preservation Foundation.

Individual lecture tickets are $10 for members and students and $15 for the public. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit sfheritage.org/lecture-series or contact Terri Le at tle@sfheritage.org or call (415) 441-3000, ext. 22.

Special thanks to our presenting sponsor, Hobart Preservation Foundation, and to the following series sponsors: ARG, Bently Reserve, Cody Anderson Wasney, Evergreene Architectural Arts, Holmes Structures, Page & Turnbull, and Sierra Maestra.
Discover SF! Summer Youth Program Celebrates Five Years

This past summer, Discover SF! Summer Youth Program reached a successful five-year milestone. Launched by Heritage in 2013 with the Galing Bata Filipino Education Center After-School Program, the program exposes middle-school students to the city’s historic architectural and cultural sites to learn about heritage conservation, meet professionals in the field, and gain a better understanding of the diverse history in San Francisco. In its second year, Heritage entered into a long-term partnership with the National Park Service (NPS) that continues to this day. Together, Heritage and NPS aim to promote diversity and the conservation of historic places by cultivating young ambassadors to take pride in their local heritage and history.

Led by Heritage Communications and Programs Manager Terri Le, the 2017 program expanded from a four-week to six-week program. Through in-class projects, interactive activity booklets, and weekly field trips, a group of 25 students uncovered stories and traditions that re-shaped their perspective on immigration, civil-and-labor-rights, and strength in diversity.

Week One kicked off the program with an in-class visit from Heritage and NPS staff to introduce the field trips through a collage of images, brand-new t-shirts, and group activities. Week Two began at the Rincon Center with a lesson on the WPA Murals, depicting the development and social changes of California. Students then toured Coit Tower with historian Dr. Robert Cherny to learn via the murals about the development and social changes of the San Francisco Bay Area. Week Three took students to the Presidio, where the budding archeologists learned about human settlement and the built environment through a tour led by the Presidio Trusts Archeology Lab. Students also learned about the Buffalo Soldiers from NPS Ranger Rik Penn. Week Four led students to Japantown to learn about the struggles and changes of Japanese Americans before and after Executive Order 9066 through interactive and thought-provoking lessons prepared by the National Japanese American Historical Society. Week Five linked lessons from past field trips in a tour of Diego Rivera’s Unity Mural at City College of San Francisco and student murals at the University of San Francisco. The murals illustrated important places, historic reverence, and symbolic messages throughout the past weeks. The final week celebrated the end of the program with a reflective project in which students worked together to create their own mural to illustrate what they learned and what they hope to achieve.

In 2018, Heritage and NPS aim to expand the program by partnering with Galing Bata and other youth education programs.
In August, Heritage staff crawled into the interstitial space above San Francisco’s famed Garden Court to witness cleaning and restoration of its luminous stained-glass ceiling. For over a century, people from around the globe have reveled in the beauty of The Garden Court, San Francisco’s banquet hall.

Built in 1909, after the original Palace Hotel was destroyed in the 1906 Earthquake and Fire, the Garden Court is topped by an intricate, $10 million stained-glass dome and Austrian crystal chandeliers. It has been considered important from its inception, having been designated one of San Francisco’s rare interior landmarks in 1969 (San Francisco Landmark No. 18). The Garden Court also became one of the first inductees to Heritage’s Legacy Bars and Restaurants program in 2013.

While the dome had been carefully maintained over the years, the first comprehensive restoration of the stained glass dome did not occur until 1989, following the Loma Prieta Earthquake. The entire hotel was closed for major renovations, allowing for complete disassembly of the ceiling. Under the supervision of AO Studios (formerly Reflection Studios), a team of up to twelve conservators toiled eight hours a day, seven days a week over 18 months to complete the project. Each of the 70,000 panels of leaded glass was carefully removed, with about one-third replaced. Broken panes were faithfully reproduced by Kokomo Glass in Indiana, the maker of the original glass in 1909.

By contrast, in 2017 the glass panels were all cleaned and re-set as needed but did not require replacement. The high-wire project, again led by AO Studios, was conducted while the 110-foot-by-85-foot ceiling remained in place, and the hotel and dining venue were open for business. During off-hours, using a scissor-lift to reach the height of 41½-feet, two skilled crews worked simultaneously. One team of four was inside the dome, above the glass, while the other was outside, positioned underneath the glass. Using a specialized foaming cleanser, water, and soft terry-cloth towels, the teams carefully washed and rinsed each piece of glass. All work was completed in only six weeks.

Hanging fourteen inches above the stained glass, laced between the dome and the protective aluminum laminated safety-glass layer, a complex cabling system secures the decorative glass in place. Panels are suspended from cables threaded through pennies that act as washers to protect the glass. (During the 1989 restoration, AO Studios discovered that pennies were the ideal size and weight to prevent the cable from cutting through the glass over time.) The large glass panels are framed in steel and all pattern work is created in solid zinc. Each of these elaborate details was checked to ensure their durability and longevity.

Heritage applauds Kyo-ya Hotels & Resorts, owners of the Palace Hotel, for its commitment to preserving the history and integrity of this San Francisco icon.
Heritage Surpasses Campaign Goal As Construction Nears Completion

Heritage is beyond pleased, and extraordinarily grateful, to report that the Campaign for San Francisco Heritage/Haas-Lilienthal House has now surpassed its original $4.3 million fundraising goal. This is an unprecedented achievement for Heritage that would not have been possible without the generous support of innumerable foundations, corporations, and individuals. Limited fundraising continues to pay for increased project costs and a few new projects that were added to the original scope of work — specifically, a new accessible restroom at the ballroom level and a new mechanical lift to access the fully redesigned rear garden.

With Heritage staff temporarily relocated to the attic, the Haas-Lilienthal House has been closed to the public since April 2017 for the comprehensive construction and restoration work the campaign funds, including seismic, accessibility, electrical, landscape, and fire-life safety upgrades. Heritage is simultaneously revamping the museum’s interpretive program guided by a new interpretive plan authored by Max van Balgooy of Engaging Places, LLC, including the development of a new visitor-orientation video (produced by Bread & Butter Films), a new permanent exhibit in the ballroom, and republication of The Haas Sisters of Franklin Street by Frances Rothmann, a loving ode to sisters Alice Haas Lilienthal and Florine Haas Bransten originally published in 1979.

The house will reopen to the public for the fourth-annual Mayhem Mansion Halloween tours in late October 2017, to be closely followed by a series of events in November and December, including Fred Rosenbaum’s lecture on “Jewish Religion and Identity at The Haas-Lilienthal House” on November 9, and Holiday Open House and Holiday Victorian Teas in December. Throughout the month of November a site-specific, multi-media art installation by visual artist Ben Wood will illuminate the front parlor windows. His work “enlivens public space while evoking voices and stories from submerged and forgotten persons, histories, and cultures.” Wood has been recognized nationally and locally for his large-scale public displays on Coit Tower, Dewey Monument within Mission Dolores, and other notable landmarks.

The Winter 2017 issue of Heritage News will be dedicated to the successful completion of the campaign and the reopening of the Haas-Lilienthal House.
DElIVER WITH CARE TO:

Thursday, November 9, 6 PM
Jewish Americans: Religion and Identity
at The Haas-Lilienthal House
2007 Franklin Street

Friday & Saturday, October 20-21
7:00 PM to 10:30 PM
Mayhem Mansion
Haas-Lilienthal House
2007 Franklin Street

October 2017
Thursday, Oct 19
6:00 PM
Ruins to Redemption: Historic Preservation
Fund Committee
Metropolitan Club
640 Sutter Street

November 2017
Thursday, Nov 9
6:00 PM
Jewish Americans: Religion and Identity
at The Haas-Lilienthal House
2007 Franklin Street

Friday & Saturday, October 27-28
7:00 PM to 10:30 PM
Mayhem Mansion
Haas-Lilienthal House
2007 Franklin Street

December 2017
Sunday, Dec 3
12:00 to 3:00 PM
Holiday Open House
Haas-Lilienthal House
2007 Franklin Street

Friday-Sunday, December 8-10
2:00 to 5:00 PM
Holiday Victorian Teas
Haas-Lilienthal House
2007 Franklin Street

For more information about upcoming Heritage events, please visit sfheritage.org or call 415.441.3000