

THE DAVIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PAPERS ON DAVIS HISTORY

Paper Number 1

*A Minimal Traditional House:
647 G Street, Davis
Tanya Lieberman*

Introduction to the Series

The purposes of this series, *Papers on Davis History*, are to publish article-length original research studies, data compilations and photographic collections on aspects of the history of Davis, California.

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Papers in the Series

1. A Minimal Traditional House: 647 G Street, Davis, Tanya Lieberman, 2003.
2. Pre-WWII Views of North Davis: Pictures from Lofland and Haig, *Davis, CA, 1910s- 40s*, John Lofland, 2003.

A Minimal Traditional House: 647 G Street, Davis

Tanya Lieberman

Biographical Note: Tanya Lieberman, a graduate of Haverford College, is the Principal Consultant to the California Senate Education Committee.

The house at 647 G Street was initially developed as part of the Bowers Addition¹ to the town of Davis in 1913. It is identified as "Lot 10, Block 1" on the 1913 map of the Bowers Addition, and by a "10" pressed into the concrete on the sidewalk pavement in front of the lot.

While the Bowers Addition lots were developed in 1913 [i.e., the land subdivided and the infrastructure prepared], lot owners were responsible for constructing homes on the properties and such construction spanned several decades. 647 G Street was one of the later developed lots. The property changed hands six times before a house was built on the site in 1946 for Beverley and Zack Farmer.

The lot was first sold in August of 1913 to Mary Pedder by A.R. Pedder,² the Contra Costa based developer of the Bowers Addition lots. The purchase price of ten dollars was well below the advertised price of \$250. The deed to the property contained several restrictions, including conditions that no "saloon business" be established on the premises, that no outhouse or barn be built at a distance less than eighty feet from the front property boundary, and that no house built on the property be of less value than twelve hundred dollars. The owner was also required to agree not to "lease or assign, or in any way transfer the said property to any one of Mongolian or African extraction, and that no one of said extraction shall be allowed to live on said property except as servants of residents thereof."

A series of subsequent sales of the property began in 1919. In that year, Mary Pedder sold the property to Charles Demmer of Los Angeles for ten dollars. Charles Demmer then sold the property to Veda and William G. Filbert of Rio Vista (who owned a number of properties in Davis during this period) in 1927 for ten dollars. In 1932 the Filberts sold the property to Grant S. King and Ethel M. King of Rio Vista (no purchase price recorded) who the next year sold the lot to the Sutter Hospital Association for one dollar. All of the conditions under which the property was initially transferred from A.R. Pedder to Mary Pedder in 1913 were continued in each of these deeds. In 1946, the Sutter Hospital Association sold the lot to Beverley and Zack Farmer for what tax stamps on the deed indicate was a price between \$501 and \$1,000.

As noted, the Farmers were the first to develop the property. Beverley Kelley was born in Los Angeles in 1922, and met Zack Farmer while they both attended the University of Southern California. They were married in 1942, and Zack was drafted into the army shortly thereafter. During World War II, he served as a Second Lieutenant under a limited service classification due to an earlier back injury. He was stationed, among other places, in Washington D.C., Little Rock, Arkansas, and the rural town of Derider, Louisiana. With the exception of Washington D.C., where Zack attended Adjutant General School, Beverley accompanied him to each of these posts.

Zack was discharged in 1944, and the couple returned to Los Angeles. In September 1945 they moved to Davis so that Zack could attend the agriculture school at UC Davis with the help of the G.I. bill. He was part of the first class of students to attend the school after the campus was converted back from war-time use by the Signal Corps, and was one of a number of veterans who moved to Davis to study after the war. Beverley worked at the university in the viticulture and zoology departments. Among other jobs, she was a teaching and lab assistant, and had the task of cutting the heads off of baby turkeys raised for research

purposes. She learned microtechnique in order to make slides for research under the late Dr. Lauren Rosenberg, Professor Emeritus.

There was very little rental housing available in Davis in the years following the war so that when Zack and Beverley first arrived, they could find no place to stay. They were befriended by the Recorder at UC Davis and stayed in her house for two years before they purchased the lot at 647 G Street. City records show that they received a building permit in March of 1946, and that the house was under construction in June of that year.

The Farmers hired James Duthie as their contractor. Duthie lived at 637 E Street, and built many houses in Davis, including 642 D and 539 E Streets. The house was built to their specifications and Beverley recalls that, "I knew that I wanted a back porch for a (manual wringer) washing machine, and a nursery" (Lieberman, 2001).

While their house was being constructed Beverley and Zack rented another house with another couple. But when their lease expired they found that the new house was not yet complete: the frame was finished, but there were no walls or working utilities. They asked the contractor to install plumbing for the toilet, and they camped out with the other family in the back yard of the lot. They set up a makeshift kitchen and dining room in the garage, and ate their meals there. On October 10, 1946 Beverley and Zack wrote their names in the wet sidewalk pavement, which can be viewed today in a patch of cement along the front median strip.

The design of 647 G Street is typical of the "Minimal Traditional" design—one widely used between the late 1930s and the early 1950s (Baker, 1994:128; City of Eugene, n.d.; Tapscott, 1998). Developed as an inexpensive and quickly-built solution to the housing crisis caused by returning soldiers and rapid population growth, many of the houses built in this style were based on designs published in architectural plan books. The publication of these plans through organizations such as the "Monthly Small House Club" made home construction more affordable for many families (Group, ed., 1946). Most houses were built for an average of \$10 per square foot. City building records indicate that 647 G Street was built for \$6,200 (exclusive of land costs), a cost of \$6.72 per square foot.

In addition to reflecting the period's need for quick and inexpensive construction, Minimal Traditional homes represent a repudiation of the decorative elements of the Craftsman and other earlier designs. This style is considered a compromise style with borrowed elements from the popular Colonial Revival and Tudor Revival, yet with greatly simplified features. Minimal Traditional houses are typified by one or one and a half-stories, a squarish floor plan, picture windows, and in many cases a detached garage. There was usually a single gable facing the street and a small rain sheltering porch. Roof pitches were lowered and eaves were set close to save construction dollars, and most detailing was omitted (Baker, 1994:128; City of Eugene, n.d., Tapscott, 1998).

While the Farmers were still camping out on their lot, Zack was elected vice president of the newly formed Davis Housing Authority (*Davis Enterprise*, February 8, 1946). "Zack," Beverley remembers, "could talk a bird out of a tree" (Lieberman, 2001). The Authority's first project was the construction of twenty affordable housing units in East Davis (*Davis Enterprise*, May 24, 1946). This development, named the Veterans Housing Project, was located on L Street, between 5th and 6th and consisted of five buildings, each containing four single-family apartments. These units were known as "knock-down houses," since they were intended to be used on a temporary basis during a housing emergency and later demolished. *The Davis Enterprise* reported on the ground-breaking for the project on May 24, 1946:

Anything with four walls and a roof would look good to most of the veterans, after they have lived in tents and trailers and crowded quarters in private dwellings. At present L street is only a country road bordered by dusty olive trees. Soon it will be the street that 20 families live on, families whose war experiences give an added meaning to the word home (p. 1).

The veteran families in the area formed the Farmers' social circle. They frequently "rolled up the carpet" for parties with the community of veterans and their wives, and had a bridge club that would meet regularly in the house. The house, according to Beverley, was "well warmed" (Lieberman, 2001).

The Farmers adopted two daughters while living in the house—the first, Linda, in 1949, the second, Theresa, in 1953. Beverley remembers bathing her daughters in the kitchen sink. The children slept in the rear bedroom, and the adults in the front bedroom. There was an upright piano in what is now the dining room, and a clothesline ran between what is now the mulberry tree and the apricot tree. There was a chicken coop just to the south of the garage, and there was a washing machine in the utility room. Rose bushes lined the front walkway, two of which remain today. There was a swing set with a slide in the back yard.

Beverley also remembers that Virgie and Frank Chiles occupied the house on the northwest corner of G and 7th streets. They were the grandparents of the current owner, Richard Chiles. While a number of street trees were planted on G Street in 1913, there were few on Lot #10. One of the few older street trees adjacent to the lot is an oak tree, planted by Rich Chiles' father.

Late in 1953 the Farmer family moved to Red Bluff to operate a ranch which had been purchased for them by Zack's father, and they sold their house to F. L. and Pearl Gregory, then of Dunsmuir. Pearl Gregory lived there until her death in 1998. After ten years in Red Bluff, the Farmers divorced, and Beverley and the children moved back to Davis. Beverley Farmer currently lives in Woodland.

David Plaut and Tanya Lieberman purchased the house from Pearl Gregory's daughter Margie Loudon in 1999 for \$178,000, and renovated it with the help of their friend Benjamin Siegel.

Notes

1. Bowers Addition is the area bounded by B & G on the west and east and Sixth and Seventh on the north and south. It forms the largest section of the Old North Davis neighborhood (Lofland, 1999).
2. For a discussion of Pedder's relation to Bower and his role in the creation of the Bowers Addition, see Lofland, 1999, pp. 56-60.

Sources

- Baker, John Milnes, *American House Styles: A Concise Guide*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994.
- City of Eugene Planning and Development Department, "Getting to Know Eugene's Historic Architectural Styles." n.d.
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- Lieberman, Tanya, "Interview with Beverley Farmer." January 6, 2001, Davis California.
- Lofland, John, *Old North Davis*. Woodland, California: Yolo County Historical Society, 1999.
- Tapscott, Daron, "Daron Tapscott's Review of Architectural Styles," Vickery Place Neighborhood Association, Dallas, Texas, 1998.



Beverley Farmer in 1949
or 1950, in front of 647 G Street



Above: Beverley Farmer
at the Lieberman/Plaut house-
warming party, 1999



Below: 647 G Street at time of sale to
Tanya Lieberman and David Plaut, 1999