

The Novato Historian

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Preserving Novato's History

Feature Section

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The Saga of the Firehouse Doors

by John A. Trumbull

Back in the late part of the twentieth century, about two decades after the official closure of Hamilton Air Force Base, it became the turn of the City of Novato to request the facilities it wanted from the base. The Federal Government on behalf of its various agencies had passed. The State of California considered taking some of the base for a new prison to replace San Quentin, but met cold resistance from the local populace. The State reconsidered and passed on claiming any property.

After the firestorm created by the suggestion of moving the county airport from Gness to Hamilton died down, the County of Marin couldn't see much gain in moving any significant operations so far north, so the Board of Supervisors passed on acquiring any of the property.

The City of Novato, on the other hand, envisioned much profit from the base. The City Council designated the Officer's Club, the bowling alley/gym, the Headquarters building (Building 500), the Officer's swimming pool, the NCO theater and the Firehouse building with two adjacent acres for a park as properties to which it would take title.

The meeting of September 15, 1998, was the time for the Council to officially designate the use for some of these properties. The Indian Valley Artists were present, and made a persuasive presentation for exclusive use of the entire Headquarters building (Building 500). I think their winning argument was concentrated in the sentence "We will rent out studios to local artists and we will pay rent to the City." The then Guild president Patricia (Pat) Willat and I attend-

ed to represent the Novato Historical Guild. It was our understanding that the Base Closure Act required that there be a space dedicated to preserving the history of the military use of the base. Our contacts with the City had indicated that a portion of the ground floor of Building 500 was where that would be located. Just before the meeting the grapevine alerted us of an impending presentation by the Indian Valley Artists.

Long before the night of the Council meeting, Colonel Bill Palmer (who had long been the volunteer custodian of the Guild's military display at the Postmaster's House museum) had been crusading to establish a Hamilton museum in the original Firehouse/Security building. The City staff had been cool to that proposal, which is why the Guild board and the professional curator of the downtown museum, Hannah Clayborn, had been concentrating on part of Building 500.

Faced with the need to have an alternative ready at the Council meeting, Pat and I quickly adopted Bill's proposal. We were armed with a large photograph of the Firehouse taken in 1935.

To our semi-surprise the City Council approved both the request of the Indian Valley Artist group and our proposal to make the Firehouse into a second city museum. In the chambers, at the back of the room awaiting consideration of the Taylor Woodrow Company's master plan for residential development of part of the unclaimed portion of the base, was Ian Gillis, the official representative of that company. He heard our presentation and saw our picture. He had

also been on the base and knew that both the three-cell brig (a sliver of which appears on the extreme left of the picture below) and the large equipment bay doors were no longer present, but that the rest of the building was in good shape. He stood up (prior to the Council's decision) and announced for the record that

and repainting of the exterior of the Firehouse.

There were still problems with the building. Captain Nurse designed the building for police and firemen in the Army. There were two dormitories on the second floor, each with its own complete bathroom. There was no connection between the two



This is the photograph that Pat Willat and John Trumbull used to help obtain the OK for a second Novato museum. The photo shows the Firehouse in 1935. The small addition at the left rear (barely seen) is the jail.

if the Firehouse was designated as the Hamilton museum building, his company would replace the equipment bay doors. His most generous gesture impressed the Council. They designated the building as the site of a museum to be developed in a public – private partnership with the Novato Historical Guild.

The years passed. Mrs. DeBorba, in her Will, left money designated to be used by the Novato Historical Guild to further develop the museum. This money was held by the City in trust because the Guild's bylaws did not allow it to own property. [This bylaw has since been changed.] The City now considered the money to have become available for developing the museum at Hamilton. So we had some seed money for required building modifications. As conditions of approval for some of Shea Homes plans for the development of their subdivisions at Hamilton, the City Council obtained free roof and window restoration, some seismic building construction improvements, grading and paving of the parking lot area (which reduced the apparent height of the building making ADA compliance less costly)

halves, and no bathroom downstairs. Each dormitory was reached by a poured concrete stairway accessible only from inside the section of the building occupied by that branch of the service. [The firemen also had a classic brass pole through the floor of their dormitory to the equipment bay below where the crash truck was garaged; the location of that pole is still visible.] Access to the equipment bays was only on the firemen's side by way of a set of concrete stairs dropping four feet from the offices to the garage area, with no railing. [To make the garage publicly accessible for handicapped patrons, the City had to construct a 40-foot long ramp to become ADA compliant.]

In the 1950's the arrival of jet-powered aircraft and the extension of the runway which moved anticipated emergencies further north resulted in the removal of the fire-rescue function to a new location at the north end of the runway. The military police remained behind and some of the administrative functions connected with the Officer of the Day post took over all the firemen's space. The big oak doors



Ray Dwelly on right, supervises volunteers from the Novato Fire Department on the demolition process.

went away and were replaced with standard people-sized doors and standard office windows inserted in the hollow concrete blocks used to fill the empty garage door openings. The equipment bay became a warren of wooden clerical cubicles under a dropped ceiling. Thus the building remained through 2001.

As a partner in the joint action entity envisioned by City Manager Rod Wood, the Guild hired architect Bill Kelly, AIA, to plan how the Firehouse could be converted into a museum. Bill had actually done some architectural work at Hamilton as a young military man, and he enthusiastically embarked on this challenge at minimal cost to the Guild. One of his first contributions was drawing up the blueprints for the missing garage doors. Since no explicit plans for



Down comes a section of non-original wall which was later replaced with the original door replicas.

them could be found, Bill worked from photos and his personal design sense to produce blueprints from which new doors could be manufactured.

In early 2002, after the City had accepted legal title to the Firehouse from the Federal Government, Mr. Wood agreed to let the Guild go to work to clear the interior. Ray Dwelly, a longtime volunteer with the Novato Fire Department (and its official photographer) arranged for a demolition work morning. The firemen went to work with hammer and pry bar, and by noon had dismantled and removed all the wooden partitions and suspended ceiling in the building. Two of the volunteer fire personnel, Bob Ruzick and Deputy Fire Chief Dan Northern, got to looking at the threshold and lintels where one of the equipment bay



All the demolition and preparation work is done. Here the new museum awaits the delivery and installation of the new doors.

doors had been. They deduced that the original steel lintels were intact, and that the concrete block infill construction was not terribly well secured to the adjacent walls. They took a couple of sledge hammers, and with Ray Dwelly supervising, they knocked down sections of wall; and later that afternoon the material was removed by more volunteers. They completed in one day a task that had been professionally bid at \$7,800.

This opened the equipment bays, and the Firehouse (which had already been a “party venue” and the target of some minor vandalism) potentially became an attractive nuisance. Ray made temporary repairs.

It became time to take the Taylor-Woodrow Company up on the offer from the prior decade. Problem: they had finished building their houses at Hamilton and had moved on to other locations, leaving only a skeleton office staff at their office on Mitchell Boulevard in Northgate. I visited them, and then Guild president, Lin Hines, engaged them in cor-

respondence. After they had received a copy of the City Council’s September 15, 1998, minutes at their headquarters, they agreed to honor their offer.

Prior to 2002, Bill Kelly had obtained estimates from two local companies for the manufacture and installation of the doors. The estimates were for \$83,000 and \$90,000 plus about \$20,000 for installation. “Get us the plans and we will have the doors made.” said Mark Chamberlain of the Taylor Woodrow Company. We did, and they did.

In the Spring of 2002 a big truck brought eight large, custom manufactured doors up from Mexico. There ensued a discussion regarding who would install the doors, and how that was to be done. Ray Dwelly proved to be both knowledgeable and persuasive, and the Taylor-Woodrow Company finished the job by paying for the manufacture and welding of the six custom hinges onto the original steel lintels for each of the doors and then lifting the massive doors into place. The picture below shows their contribution to our museum.



Since the building is a major part of our exhibit, the Novato Historical Guild is very grateful that the Taylor-Woodrow Company proved to be reliable as well as generous to our city.