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## MEMORANDUM

**Date:** August 18, 2008  
**From:** Becky Urbano  
**Project:** Hood Mansion  
**Re:** Open House Talking Points - History

Hood Mansion is named after William Hood, the original owner of this property. He had this building constructed in 1858 largely from materials found onsite. Since then it has been a flourishing winery, a successful ranch, a summer retreat, a presidential getaway, a retirement home, an orphanage, a correctional facility and now a park. The ups and downs that have played out on this property and in this building mirror the many changes that have occurred in this region.

In the process of preparing for the recent work on Hood Mansion, I was lucky enough to be part of a team that documented some interesting facts regarding the history of this amazing resource. Much of the history is based on oral histories previously documented. I've been asked to provide a little background on the history of building and the property. The dates and colorful stories of William Hood are liberally sprinkled with a little romance and a lot of supposition. We tried to verify as much of the information as possible, but some things we may never know for certain. What I present here is a mixture of fact and urban legend that hopefully is at least an accurate representation of the spirit of William Hood. If I've left anything important out, or have misrepresented any facts, I am sorry and you can feel free to reprimand me afterwards as we share some cake. At any rate, it makes for a great story. So get comfy. It's story time.

### **Hood Period**

William Hood spent his life making and loosing great sums of money. Born in St. Andrews, Scotland in 1818 to a shipwright, Hood grew up learning woodworking skills such as carpentry and cabinet making. As a young man he began in the shipbuilding trade but soon left St. Andrews for London where he was able to make more money building houses. Now in his twenties, the adventurous Hood traveled to Chile to make his fortune rebuilding the earthquake ravaged city of Valparaiso. This was to be the first of his great successes.

Utilizing his skills as a carpenter and house builder, he was soon able to earn enough money to purchase a ship in Peru. His goal was to use the ship to transport supplies from South America to San Francisco. As he was traveling from Chile to Peru to make arrangements for buying the ship, he was robbed by bandits and left penniless. He did make it to Peru a short while later and while there, he met James Shaw and his wife, Amelia Wilson. Shaw and Hood became fast friends. When it came time to leave Peru, Shaw, Wilson and Hood all left for California together.

[Incidentally, Amelia Wilson was apparently married three times to two men; a John Wilson who will soon become a part of this tale and James Shaw. Shaw was husband 2 and Wilson was husband 1 and 3. Change of heart I guess...]

In a slight change of plans, Hood moved to San Francisco where he set up a carpentry business. Sometime around 1846, Hood supposedly took a trip to countryside north of San Francisco. It was then that he first encountered the Los Guilicos rancho. Los Guilicos was first conferred to a Captain John Wilson, brother-in-law to General Vallejo, in 1839. Hood was impressed with the valley and the potential of the ranch. It soon became his goal to make enough money to purchase the property from Wilson.

When gold was discovered in 1848, demand for carpentry made Hood wealthier than most of the men scampering off to the gold fields. Business was very good. By 1850, he had earned enough money to purchase a half share in Los Guilicos. The terms of the partnership with a Mr. William Pettit are unclear. Pettit apparently sold his half of the ranch to Amelia Wilson less than a year later. Together, Hood and Wilson hired James Shaw as ranch foreman. Amelia eventually sold her share to Hood around 1854, giving him sole ownership of the property.

Some documents claim that when Hood first purchased the property, he lived in an old adobe. This adobe was apparently a remnant of the few improvements Captain Wilson made during his period of stewardship. Needless to say, nothing from this early period has been discovered.

In 1857, Hood purchased 320 acres in nearby Analy Township and presented half of the plot to his sister, Jane, and her husband Captain John Spence. Around this time, his brother George also came to Los Guilicos before settling in Santa Rosa. With a property and a settled family around him, William began to think about a family of his own.

In 1858, William Hood married Eliza Ann Shaw. Eliza was only a teenager at the time so Hood sent her to Europe to receive an education. In the meantime, he constructed the brick building we see here as a gift to his new bride upon her return. At the time, brick was a very expensive building material. Very few manufacturing kilns had been established in the area, and their weight made them costly to transport. Therefore, most brick buildings from this period were made from clay deposits found nearby and fired on site. The somewhat uneven appearance of the bricks on Hood Mansion are a testament to the handiwork of the local craftsmen. In all likelihood, the bricks were manufactured on site by Native American workers. If you look closely at the cornice, you will see curved bricks that date to the period of construction. Such details were extremely expensive and show the great success that Hood was having on his ranch.

All was not good, though during this initial period of ownership. Hood was constantly fighting land claims from squatters on his large tract of land and expending great sums of money fighting off the squatters in court and erecting fences around his crops. By the time Hood was finally officially conveyed the property in 1866, it is claimed that only one-tenth of the original rancho remained under his control. This land was the roughly 2000 acres surrounding his brick house.

Around this time Hood turned to agriculture because his lands were now too small for ranching. Together Eliza and William planted orchards and vineyards around the property. Hood was particularly fond of oranges and always had several in his pockets to give out to travelers that he met. In 1861 he built a large, three-story winery building to press his own grapes and to store the brandy he made from his apple orchards.

And along came Phylloxera...

A series of hard frosts and the onset of Phylloxera wrecked havoc on the Hoods' grapevines. In 1877 he was forced to mortgage his property on a \$30,000 deed of trust to the San Francisco Savings Society. He defaulted less than a year later and the property was sold at auction to local land owner William Bliss. Eliza and William remained on the property and William began to fade from the historic records. It appears that Eliza took over the winery business, hiring in 1878, a well-known wine maker named A. Drioton. He turned the Hood vineyard into a successful and respected wine producer that quickly became one of the largest wineries in the region. Eliza proved to be an efficient businesswoman, having herself declared a sole trader so she could operate business in her own name rather than going through her husband. She immediately purchased over 1300 acres of her Los Guilicos back from Mr. Bliss.

The good times continued and in 1887 a railhead was established a short distance from the Mansion. The Los Guilicos Station was on the opposite side of the tracks of the Santa Rosa-Carquinez Railroad (later Southern Pacific) from the house.

In 1891, Eliza borrowed \$27,000 from Francis Wensinger. The circumstances around this transaction have not been fully investigated. However what is known is that she was unable to pay back the money and he foreclosed in 1893. Also unclear is just when Eliza and William vacated Hood Mansion. Family recollections put Eliza at Hood Mansion until around the turn of the century. Hood died in a state asylum in Ukiah in 1903 and Eliza passed away in 1908 while living in San Francisco.

### **Thomas Kearns Period**

The Wensingers sold the Hood House and approximately 1700 acres to Utah Senator Thomas Kearns in 1905. Kearns was known as "The Silver King," having made a fortune in the mining industry around Park City, Utah in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was a colorful character who was well connected politically with the Church of the Latter Day Saints, in spite of his Catholic faith. These connections helped him get elected to the United States Senate in 1901. While there, he supported the conservationist programs of Theodore Roosevelt and became a personal friend of the President. At the same time, he

purchased his first newspaper, The Salt Lake Tribune. Soon thereafter, he also founded the Salt Lake Telegram. His family controlled the Salt Lake Tribune until 1997.

When Kearns failed to get reelected he turned on the Mormon Church and used his newspapers to launch bitter attacks on the political machine in Utah. This lasted for the next several years but eventually settled down as Kearns realized that it wasn't a financially secure move to lampoon the religious and political foundations of his subscribers. By 1911 he had made amends and his paper moved in more productive directions.

During this time of professional fervor, he apparently purchased the Sonoma County property as a summer house to augment his permanent and lavish home in Salt Lake City. As such, much more space was needed to keep his family and friends comfortable. Kearns expanded the second floor to its current size, added at least one bathroom on the second floor and constructed the dining room that now connects the original house to the kitchen wing. If you look carefully, you can still see the seams in the brick coursing where the second floor wings were expanded.

Kearns was known for his lavish entertaining, and counted at least three U.S. Presidents as friends. The beautiful woodwork and handcrafted lanterns in the dining room are a testament to his stylistic tastes and almost unlimited means. Kearns died in October 1918 of a stroke only days after being struck by a streetcar near his Salt Lake City home. That home is now the Utah Governor's Mansion.

### **Pythian Period**

Just preceding his unexpected death, Kearns sold the ranch in May 1918 to Peter Serck. Serck apparently intended to subdivide the property. It is unclear whether Serck ever resided at the Hood Mansion. He sold over 1500 acres to George Proctor and Wallace Ware in 1921, including the Hood Mansion and all its outbuildings. Proctor and his family farmed the property for a brief time and sold the immediate 111 acres and the winery to the Knights of Pythias in 1924.

In the days before pensions and social security, most people did not have the option of retiring. If they could not work or were injured, there were few options open to them. One of the reasons men joined fraternal organizations was the social support network that they provided. This social network often placed a high regard for its role in caring for those members of their community who needed help. Once such group, the Knights of Pythias was once one of the largest fraternal organizations in the country.

Also known as the Pythians, they were the first civic club chartered by an Act of Congress after the Civil War and operated under the banner of "Friendship, Charity and Benevolence." They purchased the property for use as a retirement and rest home for elderly and disabled brothers. They also cared for a small group of orphans during their ownership of the Hood property.

The Knights bought a fully functional farm, complete with equipment, barns, orchards, vineyards, wood land and furniture. A large reservoir provided irrigation and drinking water and the winery and poultry houses provided other income sources. They

expanded the living facilities to include a dining hall and kitchen building and several dormitories. These are the buildings that surround us today. More were planned but these were the only ones executed. The Hood Mansion was used largely for administrative functions, although some dormitory space was also included. A small cemetery was also established and the gates still remain.

### **State Period**

For over twenty years, the Pythians operated an almost self-sufficient ranch, complete with orchards and cultivated crops, chickens, cattle and a winery. However, half of this period was marked by the financial strains of the Great Depression and decreasing membership. In December 1945 they sold the property to the State of California for use as a correctional facility for girls. The state operated the Los Guilicos School for Girls until the 1970s when it was sold to the County of Sonoma. The County constructed the current juvenile detention center on most of the surrounding acreage. During this time, the Hood Mansion was used only occasionally for meetings or administrative functions.

### **Today**

Today Hood Mansion is still owned by the County of Sonoma but it is now part of the Regional Parks system. The exact plan for the property is still being developed but Hood Mansion will be the centerpiece of any activities within the park. The interior spaces have been partially documented and analyzed in our attempts to date the finishes and determine what the rooms might have looked like in Hood's time, Kern's time, or when the Pythians were using the building as office space. Most of the finishes date to a 1970s era Decorator Showcase. More work is necessary to gather information, photographs, oral histories and documents that might help us reconstruct the finishes to historically accurate appearances.

### **Statement of Significance**

Officially, the Hood Mansion has been recognized as a significant historic resource by the State of California and by the National Parks Service. It was listed as State of California Landmark in 1959 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1998 for its association with the Knights of Pythias. In the course of this project, a much broader and richer story has come to light and we feel that there are many points in the history of Hood Mansion that deserve further attention.

The Hood property represents a landscape that typified rural life in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Many aspects of agricultural practices in California were represented on this parcel of land up through the years of Pythian ownership. It was a ranch, an orchard, a successful vineyard, housed a popular winery, contained a thriving poultry business and to a lesser extent, a viable logging enterprise. The very fruitfulness of the land surrounding the Hood Mansion was one of the primary reasons the Pythians chose this location. When they purchased the property in 1924, they bought a largely self-sustaining agricultural enterprise, one begun by Hood, maintained and expanded upon by his wife, updated by Kerns and managed by other owners until the Pythians moved in.

The Hood Mansion could be a potential resource for its associations with William Hood and Thomas Kerns. Hood was a pioneering settler in Sonoma County. His contributions

to the early social and economic development of the county are considerable. He was one of the first settlers in the region and established one of the largest and most well-known Californian wineries in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century on the Los Guilicos property. Thomas Kearns entertained widely at Hood Mansion, using it as his summer home, bringing many notable political figures of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to Sonoma County. He was a friend of presidents and senators alike and his brief possession of the property made the area well known to an influential group of individuals.

The Hood Mansion itself could be a potential resource for its architectural importance. The Hood Mansion stands as the oldest brick house in Sonoma County. Additionally, it was constructed with bricks handmade on site from native materials. The craftsmanship of the brickwork and the early construction of the house make it important to Sonoma County on a regional level.

Further research is needed to more fully develop interpretive materials to share the rich history of the property with visitors to the park, historians and scholars. But for now, we can revel in the fact that this wonderful resource is even here to celebrate 150 years. When you walk around the grounds today, look for the signs of the early owners, an old tree, a seam in the brickwork, the Italian marble fireplace surrounds, and try to imagine the many people who passed through these doors. Today we can share a part of their stories and be proud of the County's stewardship of this amazing historical treasure.