

## The Docktown Tank house

*A Redwood City icon*



A presentation by Lee Callister

It's one of a kind, not like anything else anywhere: An old tankhouse that dates from the dawn of the 20th century, turned roadhouse and community center.

It's tower was built with massive redwood timbers from the forests above Redwood City, whose lumber was shipped down the creek that runs next to the old tank, and transported to rebuild San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. It's a showcase for the resilience of the wood of the giant trees, with beams as strong as ever 120 years later.

It's topped by a giant metal tank that can be seen for miles from all directions, brightly painted with the flag of the Yacht Club it houses. Walls have been added to the structure, and a bar and kitchen added, along with a dance floor, and a lounge area in the back, making it a popular place to mingle, eat, and listen to the many musicians that play there.

Who built it and how it evolved is the subject of this paper.



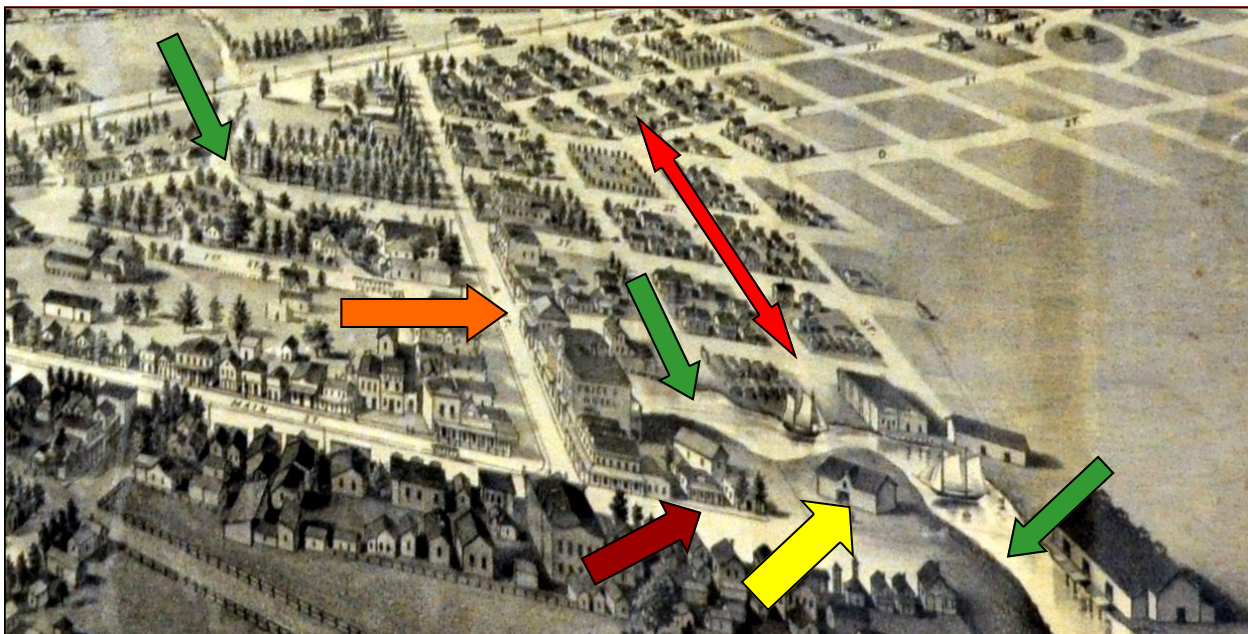


The first owner of Docktown was William Holder who arrived on the Peninsula in 1851. Redwood City was still called Embarcadero, or Pulgas Embarcadero because the harbor at the junction of three creeks served as the wharf for the Alameda de las Pulgas Ranch



A picture of him as an old man is located on his obituary pages along with a picture of his gravestone at Union Cemetery on Woodside Road.

A builder by trade, Holder soon set up a planing mill at the end of Main Street next to the Creek where he prospered, cutting giant Redwoods into lumber that could be shipped down the creek to San Francisco and beyond. He also began to buy up the land across the Creek towards the bay.

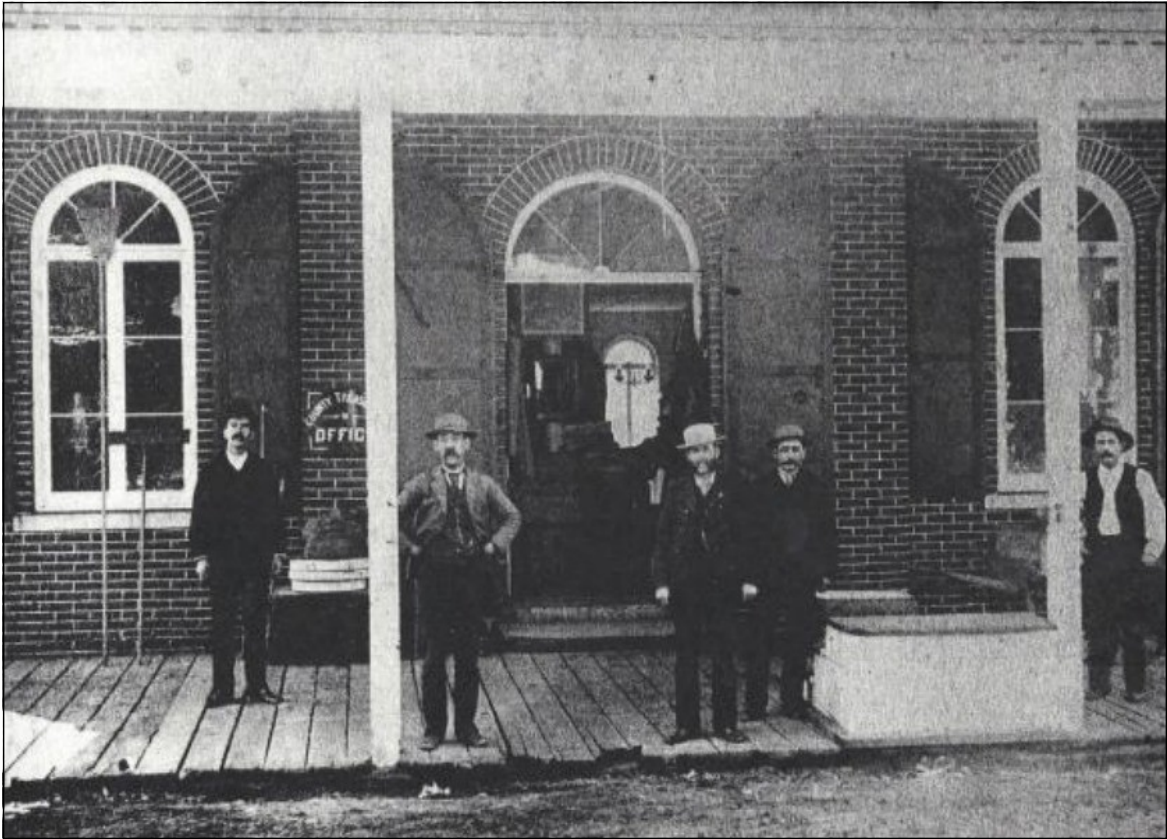


*Heart of the City in 1891. Green arrows show creek and turning basin (middle arrow), Orange is Bridge Street (Broadway), Dark Red is Main street, which ended at the creek. Bright Red is Holder Street (Bradford). Yellow arrow is the probable location of Holder Mill, which may be the building shown.*

According to his obituary, Holder was the first man to build a “substantial” home in the City, on Main near Bradford, which was still called Holder Street well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and also, the first to fly the American flag on a 42’ pole he erected at the westerly corner of Marshall and Main Streets, just up the street from his home and shop. The house burned down in 1927

The birdseye view picture above is actually from 1891. By then Holder owned about 200 acres of the land north and east of the creek, and his lumber was moving down the creek to the Bay, passing by his own property, which included today’s Docktown. He could have had the tower built on his land next to the creek.

Although they would soon be overrun by squatters on the Pulgas Ranch, the town's inhabitants at that time only numbered about 150 people.



In this picture taken in front of the historic office and then store at 726 Main St, Holder is the second from the left. Built by John Diller and then sold to PP Chamberlain, to Holder's left, it is the oldest commercial building in Redwood City today. In those days it was a gathering place for the locals.

The building's back entrance overlooked the creek until it was paved over.

Here's what the building looks like now.





Eventually Holder owned all the land to the right of the creek just downstream of his home at the end of Main Street, which was also the property line of the Rancho de las Pulgas land grant. The area was largely marshlands, cut by sloughs and creeks. According to his obituaries, he owned “most of the property on the north end of Main Street” encompassing the current Kaiser Hospital lands, Creekside plaza, Toys R Us, Kmart, and everything north and south and east that is now included in the Inner Harbor Plan. All together he owned about 200 acres by then.



**1868. Green arrows show Redwood Creek. Yellow outline shows today's Inner Harbor. Blue Arrow points to William Holder's name. Orange arrow shows downtown Redwood city. The red box is the area now known as Docktown.**

Holder never married or had any children, and as he grew older he sold off the land to support himself.,

He would have sold 1.5 acres to IM Wentworth for a tannery and shoe manufacturing operation on Redwood Creek in the 1873 on the property now occupied by Toys R Us and Kohls.

Wentworth sold the tannery to a supplier, Joseph Frank and his sons, in 1889 to settle a debt, for \$7500, which was lot of money at a time when lots were selling for \$100 an acre. But leather was an



By 1909 the Land belonged to Franks Tannery. Green arrows show Redwood Creek. Yellow outline shows today's Inner Harbor. Red Line is just above Docktown's Location. Blue Arrow points to Franks Tannery name. Orange arrow shows downtown Redwood city.

important commodity and the tannery prospered under the Frank family, becoming for many years the largest employer in Redwood City.

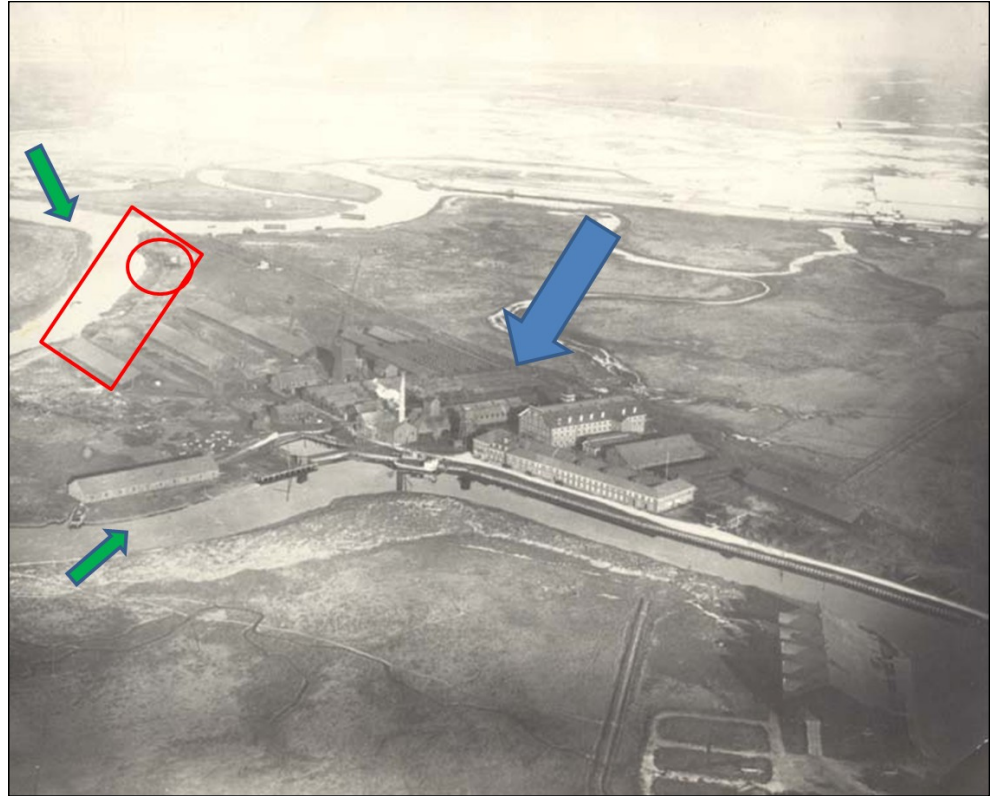
By 1909 Franks Tannery owned the entire 200 acres. For many years Tannery maintained it's own wharves (used also by others) after the Army corps of engineers stopped dredging the creek and the Port moved further downstream.



Franks Tanning Company showing wharves & buildings (c.1910)



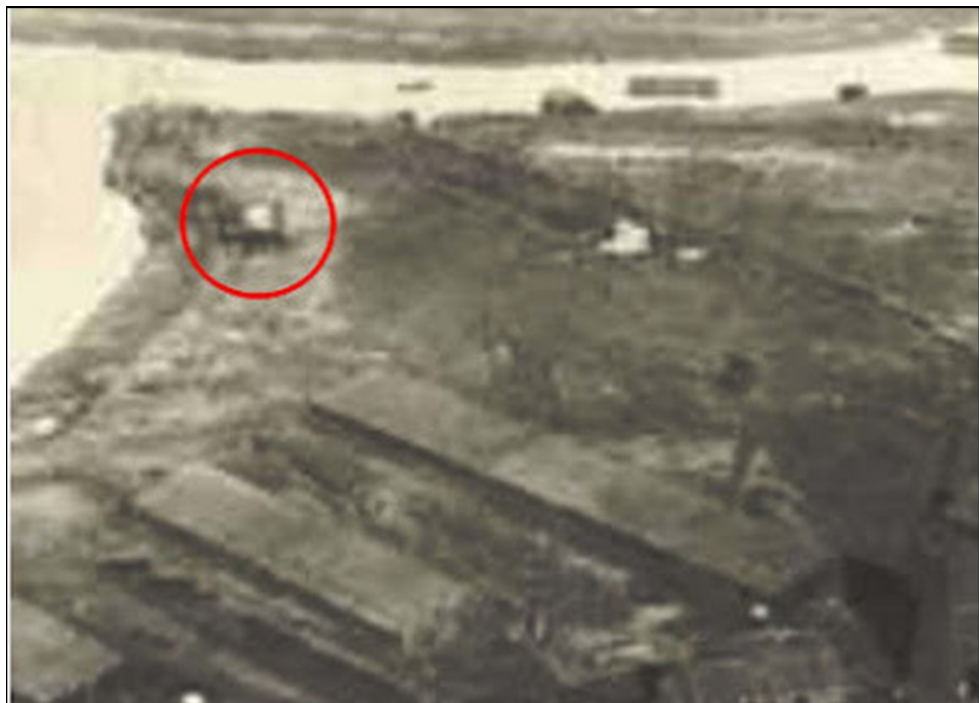
It is in this 1917 areal photo of Franks Tannery that we first see the tank-house, which can be seen in the distance behind the tannery



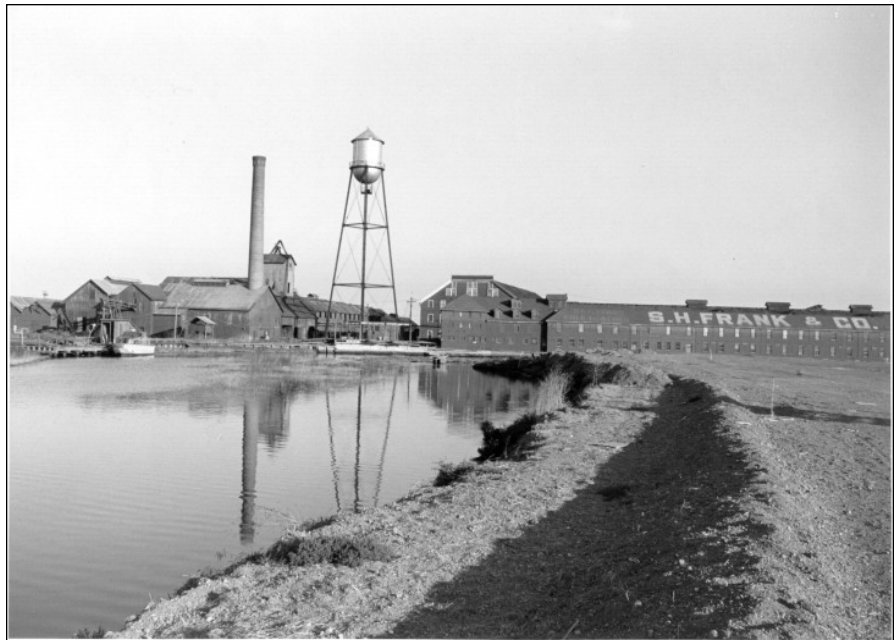
1917 photo. Green arrows = Redwood Creek. Red Line is Docktown w/ Tankhouse circled. Blue Arrow points to Tannery. Bottom picture, zooming in on the tankhouse.

The mud below the tank in this close-up, taken at low tide, shows the creek was already silting in again after the last time it had been dredged.

Was it the Franks who built the tank-house? And if so why?



Water is needed in making leather, and some have also suggested the tank had something to do with leather operations,. But the tannery had its own, much larger tower, which survived the fire in 1968 that destroyed the rest of the tannery. And the squat little tank at Docktown in the 1917 photo sits alone on the creek at some distance from the tannery.



*Water Tank at Franks Tannery*

Former Marina Operator Fred Earnhart and former Harbor master Paul Porri both say the tank was built to supply water to the schooners that rode the creek into the heart of Redwood City in the early days when the wharves and turning basin were located near the present day City Hall. That would make the tankhouse one of the last vestiges of this rich maritime history. But it implies those vessels were steam powered, which has not been proven. Large steamships would not have navigated the narrow creek.



*Little has changed in this picture from 1931, again showing the tannery in the distance, with the tank beyond next to the creek.*



Rivets on the tank are similar to those found in other steel tanks and trains and ships built in the latter quarter of the 18th century.

SF Water Dept historian Michael Housh suggests that, based on the rivets and design, it was probably built by the Union Ironworks in the era between 1870 and 1910.



Union Iron Works was purchased by Bethlehem steel whose successor was acquired by yet another company based in Europe.

The Franks family included 7 sons, all of whom died untimely deaths so that management of the enterprise passed from one to another, then to the inlaws, and finally in the 1950s, to a man named Joseph Salaman who had worked for Franks Tannery since he was 13..

Salaman teamed up with Hotel Magnate Ben Swig in 1959 to purchase the tannery properties from the family and develop the lands closest to downtown, including the Kaiser Hospital site, Kmart, and Creek Plaza, gave the State a right of way for a freeway through the heart of the old Tannery, which later burned down,, and gave or sold Docktown to his sons, J. Franklin Salaman and his brother Joseph Waldo Salaman.

Boating was very popular at that time, and with Joseph Waldo as a silent partner, “Jay” Salaman and his partner Warren Cash set out to create the most modern boat harbor in the south bay. Jay Salaman and Cash leased the creek waters from the city, and Cash once again dredged out the mud, and they built what was then known as Redwood Harbor, with covered berths, a boat landing, a crane, and boat yard. There were plans for a miniature railroad around the yards.

With the water tank empty and available, Salaman removed some of the pillars from the tower and created a building he used for the harbor office, which later became the office of a boat dealer and then a real estate company, and was touted by Jay Salaman as the site of a restaurant that was never built.

A boating enthusiast himself, Salaman was one of the founders of the Peninsula Power Cruising Club, in Palo Alto, whose members cruised bay waters in the days when gasoline was cheap and conservation not yet trendy. Salaman brought the group to Redwood City, and as more of the members acquired sailboats the club transformed into the Peninsula Yacht Club.

But the creek bottom again filled with mud, and dreams of a dynamic boat harbor on the creek diminished as better harbors were established downstream, and the club moved out of the Marina.

Cash left, and Salaman eventually traded the lease to the marina to his bookkeeper, Fred Earnhardt in payment for gambling debts and other considerations, and turned his attention to his other properties, and society friends in San Francisco where he owned a home in Dolores Heights.

The Salaman brothers still owned the property, but were content to collect rent on it.. The shallow water was better suited for flat bottom structures like the floating homes and houseboats that would soon proliferate there.





Jean Groberg, who made this sketch of the tank during that period, described the building as a huge steel tank, supported by a substantial trestle, surrounded by houseboats. “The area below the tank-house contains offices,” she said. “The houseboat residents pick up their mail at the bank of postal boxes mounted on the left side of the building. It was an interesting area with many boats up on blocks being worked over and refurbished. “

Groberg developed a passion for drawing the tankhouses she found throughout Northern California, creating hundreds of drawings, but found this one different from most. Her definition of a Tankhouse, was a water tank built on a tower to make water pressure, where walls were created around the tower to create a building or part of a house. The designs themselves were very varied they evolved into many different types of structures and put to many different uses.

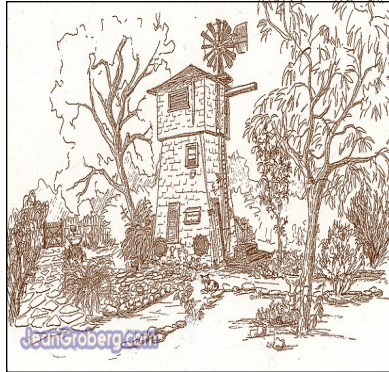
Mostly they were structures standing alone or connected to houses and barns, with a cistern like the one under the structure where rain water collected. Most had a windmill to draw the water up into the tank from where it could be drawn down as needed.

The Docktown tankhouse has a cistern to collect water, and brass pipes extending through the ceiling, but no indications there was ever a windmill.

Equally unique is the design and materials used. Most tanks are much taller. Most were made of redwood, sometimes with a wooden base, sometimes steel. This may be only one found that has a redwood base with a steel tank on top. The tank is huge compared to most of the tanks.

And the Docktown tankhouse was not originally a building. It was a stubby tower built with made of huge redwood pillars to support the weight of the large tank. It became a building after it was no longer used to store water, by removing the less essential pillars to open up the space inside and building walls around the base.

Meanwhile, with his wife Mau-reen, a cancer crusader who would ironically later die of cancer, Jay Salaman became involved in alternative health care, which led to his arrest for trying to smuggle an illegal cure called laetrile into the US from Mexico. It's not clear if there was any connection to the mysterious loan of \$50,000 in gold coins from Taroub Rusnak buried in his backyard in San Francisco that



***Tankhouses come in all sizes and shapes. These are closer to the norm.***

would eventually lead to her acquisition of half of Docktown from Jay's second wife, Janice, after he died. Jay claimed Mauareen dug up the gold when she divorced him, and carried it off to Atherton

In the meantime, looking for a new home, the Yacht Club moved into the recently vacated space in the tank house in the early 1980's, and continued to expand and improve the property,

Because of the relationship with Salaman the club always paid very affordable rates for rent, on the condition that members maintain and improve the building on their own dime, and they added the bar, a dance floor/reading library, kitchen, back bar, and other improvements. The design on the tank, created by one of its members, has been painted and repainted mostly recently in 2013.

Time marches on. Fred Jr. took over the lease on the harbor after his father died. It had become evident that the tidal waters, which retreated to mud flats twice a day, were better suited for flat bottom houseboats, floating homes, and small boats that could be utilized for residences, and Earnhardt encouraged the transition because it was more profitable.

By the time he gave up the business in Feb of 2013 there were about 100 residences on the creek, and while a few sailboats still endured the indignity of sitting in the mud when the tide was out, most of the serious sailors were keeping their boats at Pete's and the Municipal pier.



***A wake at the Yacht Club for a community member who passed on.***

What emerged was a floating community of people who live on the water, and use the tankhouse building as a gathering place, where people meet nearly every day for drinks or dinner, meetings, and parties. Weddings have been performed here and divorces celebrated. Children have been introduced and the dead honored. It has been loved and cherished, slowly improved, A fountain of fond memories for the Docktown community and their friends.



As the leaseholder for the creek, the city took over operation of the Marina after Earhardt left.. By now the land was the property of Joseph Waldo Salaman's children, Jodi and Franklin, and the successor to Jay Franklin, Taroub Rusnak who acquired a half interest for \$500,000 in 2010 after forcing Jay's widow into a sheriff's sale over unpaid debts arising from the loss of the gold coins.

A sale of the property to a developer with a plan to build 150 condos is awaiting the adoption of the Inner Harbor Plan.

### **The Oil Tank Theory**

The author has just recently become aware of an alternate theory for the origin for the tankhouse that's less romantic, but more in keeping with the neighborhood's blue collar roots. Under this theory the tank was an oil tank, filled via the creek with fuel oil or heating oil, which was then distributed to users within the tannery or even sold to other parties. That would explain the squat design since building up water pressure would not have been not a goal. Setting the tank at a remote location also makes sense if there is danger of an explosion.

This theory requires further research, but does not change the facts as to the age of the tankhouse or it's iconic nature.

### **Research Directions**

This report points out age and historical significance of the tankhouse, as well as it's relevance as a cultural icon, but leaves questions unanswered. Further research will be needed to establish once and for all who built the structure, originally, and for what purpose.

Proposed research on deed transfers, assessment records, and maps and additional documents may be able to answer these questions once and for all.

The author has supporting documents for all assertions made in this report, but did not have time to compile a bibliography prior to the deadline for submitting the report.

Emails exchanged with the author of a book on Tankhouses, and a historian at the SF Water Dept. Are attached.

Email

12/24/13

Lee Callister <lcallister@digiville.com>

to Tom Cooper <TankhouseTom@gmail.com>

Hi Tom

Wondering if you might have any insights into the history of this unique old "stubby" of a watertank tower which has been turned into a building that houses our yacht club in Redwood City. The tank is built of steel, riveted together

The tower is built with redwood supports, at an angle. some have been removed to open up the space. A steel, made with rivets that sits on a redwood pedestal seems quite unusual based on other photos I have seen so far.

It can seen in the distance near the creek in this picture of Frank's Tannery in Redwood City in 1917.

here's the original photo, tank again in the distance next to the creek.

I've been told the rivets date from the 1870's but have no proof of that. Also that it was originally used to provide water to steam boats (mostly scows) that used Redwood Creek to access what was then a harbor in downtown redwood city (which because the creek was subject to silting was eventually covered over.)

It is on property belonging to Frank's Tannery (which was the largest landholder and employer in the area for many years) but pictures of the tannery shows it had a much larger tower for it's leather making.

It has also been suggested it may have been used to provide water for a small miniature railroad system that may have connected some of the outbuildings.

The sides of the tower were closed off in the 1960's turning it into a building, and some of the supports were used as it no longer supported much weight. About 1980 it became the Peninsula Yacht Club which it still is today, whose members have continued to enlarge and improve it.

Developers now want to build condos here and tear it down and we are trying to discover it's history and save it.

Wondering if your research has uncovered any info which may help us understand the age or early history. Any help appreciated

Lee Callister



12/30/14

Lee Callister <lcallister@digiville.com>

to Tom Cooper <TankhouseTom@gmail.com>

Hi Tom

I wrote you once before and received no answer. Am still looking for information on this structure, called a "tankhouse" by the artist of this line drawing, (now deceased) who painted lots of other tank houses that can also be seen on this website. I do see a few other round tanks. And believe there are others made of steel. This structure does have a cistern below it. Folklore says it collected for steamships traveling up and down this creek to downtown Redwood City.

<http://www.jeangroberg.com/media/img/f2cecf83/Docktown-Tankhouse-picture.html>. Any related info you can point me to would be greatly appreciated, as we would like to save it as a historical icon.

12/30/14

**Tom Cooper <tankhousetom@gmail.com>**

Thanks for writing again, Lee. There seems to have been a mix-up, because I see that my reply, dated January 21st, went to JoAnn McDonnell for some reason. Here it is again:

"Fascinating! I'm almost certain yours is the only Yacht Club with its headquarters in a water tank, and regret that I can't give you any historical info about it.

Best wishes,

Tom C"

In my limited experience, steel tanks came later than redwood tanks, but that one looks bigger than most. I hope you can save it!

Best wishes for the new year!

Tom C

PS I'm sorry to hear that Jean Groberg died -- I really like her sketches

**Email to Historians at SF Water Dept**

info@sflower.org

Tue, Jan 7, 2014 at 1:04 PM

Fwd: questions re unique water tower

Hello

I am wondering if you might know of anyone who can help authenticate the age of an old water tank.

This unique old "stubby" of a watertank tower has been turned into a building that houses our yacht club in Redwood City. The tank is built of steel, riveted together

The tower is built with redwood supports, at an angle. some have been removed to open up the space

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It is on property belonging to Frank's Tannery (which was the largest landholder and employer in the area for many years) but pictures of the tannery shows it had a much larger tower for its leather making. And it now appears the tannery didn't own that part of the land until 1932.

The sides of the tower were closed off in the 1960's turning it into a building, and some of the supports were used as it no longer supported much weight. About 1980 it became the Peninsula Yacht Club which it still is today, whose members have continued to enlarge and improve it.

We are very interested in knowing the history and age of the structure.

Any help at all including references would be greatly appreciated

Best regards

Lee Callister

**From:** Capuyan, Benito **On Behalf Of** Info  
**Sent:** Thursday, January 16, 2014 2:33 PM  
**To:** Housh, Mike  
**Subject:** FW: questions re unique water tower

Hi Mike and Happy New Year!

Do you know anyone in the business of authenticating the age of old water tanks?

-Benito

**Mike Housh to Benito Capuyan**

Benito - The most likely manufacturer of such a large steel structure in the 1870-1900 period in the Bay Area would be the Donohue Brother's **Union Iron Works** using steel from the Pacific Rolling Mills in Alameda. This company, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century's premier west coast industrial steel fabricating, locomotive manufacturing, and shipbuilding company, was bought out by **Bethlehem Steel** in 1905 - I would bet that the still operating successor company's archives (which I think are located in Hingham, MA) might still hold information about the predecessor company's large later 19<sup>th</sup> century projects like this. At least it would be a good starting point to look. Another potential resource might be San Mateo County's property tax records that would usually list large assets like this huge water tank when totaling up local businesses' tax bills by year. Mike

Michael Housh, Historian  
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