

Pacific Heights Architects #29 - August G. Headman

The focus of this series is architects who had an influence over the way Pacific Heights looks today. The distinctive group of six properties on the west side of Lyon Street, at the end of Green, are unusual in that they project into what is otherwise Presidio National Park land. Many maps showing the boundaries of the Park fail to acknowledge this group of houses!



August Goonie Headman was born in Roseburg, Oregon on April 13, 1883. His father, Abraham, was a machinist and brought the family to San Francisco before August reached his teens. After completing his high school education, August began work as a draftsman with established firms Havens & Toepke and Salfield & Kohlberg, in the evenings attending classes at the Hopkins Art Institute, the Mechanics Institute, and the Humboldt Evening Technical School. Recognizing the need for specific architectural training among draftsmen, Headman founded the San Francisco Architectural Club in September 1901, which soon had an impact locally on the level of architectural draftsmanship and artistic design. The club became one of the leading architectural clubs in the U.S. and Headman continued his involvement with it over the years, giving his time freely to the younger members.

In 1905, Headman travelled east to attend the University of Pennsylvania, graduating from the Department of Architecture in 1907. He followed that with a spell with Walker & Gilette in New York and then travelled to Paris to study at an atelier of the École des Beaux-Arts. Perhaps lacking the financial resources to commit to a diploma course there, or realizing the opportunities that awaited him in the reconstruction of San Francisco following the 1906 earthquake and fire, Headman returned to his adopted city in 1909, entering into a partnership with established architect Perseo Righetti (1871-1928).

Together Righetti & Headman designed a large number of downtown apartment buildings and hotels. One of the earliest commissions they won, in August 1909, was to design the replacement Native Sons of the Golden West building at 414 Mason between Geary and Post, on the same city block as the St. Francis Hotel, which fronts on Powell. This was to replace the five-story Class C building designed by Adolph Lutgens in 1895, which had been irreparably damaged by the fire following the 1906 earthquake. The Native Sons fraternal organization decided on a top-quality Class A steel-framed eight-story structure at a cost of \$210,000, containing over 57,000 square feet of usable space, which remains today a desirable office and meeting venue downtown. The steel frame was built by the Pacific Rolling Mill Company and one girder, at 65 tons, was the largest manufactured in California to that point. Ernest H. Hildebrand (1880-1963), a former classmate of Headman's at the University of Pennsylvania, was an associate architect with Righetti & Headman on the project.

In addition to multi-unit apartment buildings and hotels, Righetti & Headman designed some fine duplexes and single-family homes, for example, 2230-32 Green Street (1910), 1827-31 Jones Street (1911), and 80 West Clay Park (1912). The Righetti & Headman partnership was dissolved in 1914 and Headman established his own practice.

The group of buildings which is the subject of this article has a history dating back to 1833. In that year Corporal Apolinario Miranda, a cavalryman with the Company of San Francisco based at the Presidio petitioned his Commandant of Arms, Jose Sanchez, that he be granted a 100 vara (approx.

275 by 275 feet) plot of land on the edge of the Presidio, called El Ojo de Agua de Figueroa after a nearby spring. The petition claimed that Miranda was about to retire (although he was only 40 years old at the time) and had already built a 'temporary house' on the property. The grant was signed by Sanchez on September 16, 1833. It is likely that the inspiration for Miranda's petition came from his wife, Juana Briones. The two had married in May 1820 at Mission Dolores.

Juana Briones was a devout, enterprising woman, a rancher and a healer of the sick. The couple had eight children by 1841, but Apolinario proved to be an abusive husband, causing Juana to report him to his superiors and eventually to separate from him. She established another homestead for her family on the trail leading from the Presidio to Yerba Buena cove, close to where Sts. Peter and Paul Church is now, in North Beach. A plaque dedicated by the Board of Supervisors on October 5, 1997 ('Juana Briones Day') honors her achievements as the First Woman Settler of San Francisco.

After Apolinario Miranda died in 1847, Juana petitioned to perfect her claim to the property on the edge of the Presidio and the 'Miranda Grant', as it became known, was eventually confirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in January 1861. By then Juana had moved south to live on a 4,439 acre ranch she had bought for \$300 in June 1847, the Rancho La Purisma Concepción, land which is today Los Altos Hills. She sold the Miranda Grant to Matilda Hill in April 1862.

The Miranda Grant was transferred several times subsequently. By 1894 it was owned by Emma L. O'Connor and it was purchased soon afterwards by Frederick T. Duhring. The City had mapped Lyon and Green Streets through the middle of it, which split it into three parcels, one on the southeast corner of the intersection, another on the northeast corner, and the third on the west side of Lyon Street, spanning Green. In March 1909, Duhring's quiet title action (McInerney Judgment), necessary following the loss of the City's records in the 1906 earthquake and fire, was approved by a Superior Court judge.



The six properties at 2525 through 2637 Lyon when completed in 1924

The parcel on the west side of Lyon changed hands again and in November 1922 was sold by John and Adela Gantner to Carlo Matraia. Matraia immediately deeded one-third interests both to August Headman and to real estate broker Robert A. Wilson. The parcel was then divided into six lots. Headman provided the Italian Renaissance design of the group and Wilson marketed them.

All of the properties started life as duplexes, except for Matraia's own house at 2601 Lyon, squarely opposite Green Street, for which Headman designed a lovely villa with an attractive Beaux-Arts double-curved staircase. Matraia lived there until 1940 and it was the home of Bob Lurie, former owner of the San Francisco Giants, from 1980 to 1994.



***Headman's own property on the left.
Note the two-story living room in the upper unit.***

Headman kept the southernmost property (2525-27 Lyon) for himself and it is the only one with a two-story living room in the upper unit. Sadly, he died at his new home on October 28, 1925 after an extended illness following an operation in December 1924. His wife Irene Flint Headman continued to own the property until 1941.

Headman's death at the age of only 42 came as a shock not only to his family, including his parents and three brothers, but also to the architectural community. A resolution passed by the San

Francisco Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), written by Ernest H. Hildebrand, his former classmate and associate, and Morris M. Bruce, Secretary of the Chapter from 1917-1920, included these words: "Mr. Headman was a facile draftsman of unusual skill and an architect of distinction who had the rare combination of an artistic temperament coupled with executive ability. His high ideals and fine character were an inspiration to all who knew him and his ability and integrity were a never failing source of strength and assurance to those with whom he worked and those whom he served. Few architects have labored more conscientiously and intelligently for the upholding of the traditions of faithful service and devotion to the client and the community."

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