

Home & Garden Columns:

East Bay Then and Now: Allenoque Manor Was a Scene of Hospitality for 5 Decades

By Daniella Thompson

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When Berkeley boosters publicized the city circa 1905, they invariably pointed to the 1700 block of Le Roy Avenue as their shining example. Situated one block to the north of the UC campus, the short stretch between Le Conte Avenue and Ridge Road boasted two of Berkeley's most opulent and ballyhooed residences: the Volney D. Moody house, known as "Weltevreden," and the Allen G. Freeman house, "Allenoque." Each was designed by a fashionable architect (A.C. Schweinfurth and Ernest Coxhead, respectively) and was clad in clinker brick-a material popular with Arts and Crafts builders.

The two estates were separated by the north fork of Strawberry Creek, which could be traversed by two clinker-brick bridges.

Allenoque's owner, Allen Gleason Freeman (1853-1930), was born on a farm in Flushing, Michigan, the third of seven children. As a teenager, he worked on the farm, as did his elder brothers. Eventually he migrated to Chicago and entered the firm of J.K. Armsby Co., wholesale commission merchants who would come to control the distribution of fresh and dried California fruit and Alaskan salmon. It was probably in Chicago that Freeman met his future wife, Jessie Katherine Marsh (1858-1940), who was listed in the 1880 U.S. census as a reporter living in Hyde Park, Cook County, IL. Their marriage took place on May 25, 1887.

The Freemans appeared in San Francisco the same year. By now, Allen was general manager of J.K. Armsby Co. In 1903, the company's office would be located at 138 Market St. and include canned fruit, dried fruit & raisin, and bean departments. The canned fruit was marketed under the Argo, Ambassador, and Red Dart labels. Later, George Newell Armsby, the founder's son, would engineer the merger that gave birth to the California Packing Corporation (Calpak), whose most famous brand was Del Monte.

Living in San Francisco and then in Oakland, the Freemans were active members of the Unitarian Church. In 1890, Mrs. Freeman was treasurer of the newly established Pacific Coast Woman's Unitarian Conference. The founding of the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley in 1891 gave the couple a reason to move here.

In 1897, the congregation purchased land on the corner of Dana and Bancroft, and the following year, a shingled church designed by Schweinfurth was erected (it is now the University Dance Studio). The Freemans lived nearby, in a duplex at 2401 Telegraph Ave., which was then a highly desirable address. Duncan McDuffie would

occupy the other flat in 1904, and Louis Titus lived a short block to the north. In 1902, Freeman and Titus were among the founding directors of the University Savings Bank of Berkeley.

As the character of Telegraph Avenue was being transformed from high-end residential to apartments and retail blocks, the well-to-do began to move out. But even before the first business block went up, Allen Freeman bought a large parcel on the corner of Ridge Road and Le Roy Avenue, in Daley's Scenic Park. Volney Moody, another Unitarian, had already built a manse on the same block in 1896, and a year earlier, the Unitarian Maybeck heralded the birth of the local Arts and Crafts movement by designing a brown-shingle house for Charles Keeler two blocks to the east.

Schweinfurth, the architect of the Moody house and the First Unitarian Church, was already dead in 1903, when Freeman engaged the firm of Coxhead & Coxhead to design his house. Ernest Coxhead (1863-1933), like Maybeck and Schweinfurth an important early shaper of the First Bay Region Tradition, was English-born and -trained. In 1886, he and his older brother Almeric (1862-1928) established a practice in Los Angeles, moving to San Francisco four years later.

Ten years prior to the Freeman commission, Coxhead designed the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house (now Goldman School of Public Policy) a block away. It resembled a row of houses in an old English village. For Freeman, Coxhead created a large Colonial Revival house with oversized gambrel dormers on the north and south façades.

**In many respects, Allenoque owes a debt to the Los Angeles house of business tycoon and art collector Edwin Tobias Earl, who in 1890 invented the refrigerated railroad car for shipping oranges to the East Coast. An earlier Coxhead design, the Earl house was built at 2425 Wilshire Blvd. in 1895-98 and demolished in 1957. Both houses featured steep roofs set with disproportionately large dormers (albeit in different styles); a projecting front porch fenestrated with arched openings on three sides and crowned with a neo-classical balustrade; a large, rectangular windowed bay projecting from the living room; and clinker brick exteriors. As in many other Coxhead residences, the rustic exterior belies a formal, rich interior.**