

Bowen's Inn, Revisited

By Jerry Sulliger

Since the 1970s, there has been a general belief that the structure located at 834 Delaware Street was originally the grocery and post office operated by Capt. William J. Bowen at the northwest corner of Delaware Street and San Pablo Avenue, which he called the Ocean View House. This story was spread in the 1940s by the popular *Berkeley Daily Gazette* columnist Hal Johnson and repeated by George A. Pettitt in his 1973 book, *Berkeley: the town and gown of it*. Neither of these writers provided any sources to substantiate the claim, and Johnson was known for stretching stories a bit. Pettitt even published one of Carleton Watkins' 1861 photographs looking up San Pablo Avenue with the Ocean View schoolhouse on the right, and claimed that Bowen's Ocean View House was just up the road on the west side of San Pablo Avenue. This ignored the fact that the schoolhouse was on the southeast corner of Virginia Street and San Pablo, and the Ocean View House, which was on the northwest corner of Delaware and San Pablo, would have been behind the photographer. On the next page, Pettitt makes the assertion, in a caption next to a photograph, that the photo shows the Ocean View House, which was purchased by Capt. James S. Higgins, and later moved to Delaware and Fifth Street, and then moved again, and he didn't know where the photo was taken.

In 1985, the structure at 834 Delaware Street was designated a City of Berkeley Landmark, and much of this story was repeated and expanded. The landmark application also confused James S. Higgins with Michael Higgins as the owner of a large ranch on the northeast corner of San Pablo and Dwight Way. There were so many people named Higgins in West Berkeley, that James S. Higgins always used his middle initial. After all, he ran a temperance grocery—no liquor—while down the street, at the Delaware and Third Street train stop, James Higgins (no middle initial) ran a saloon and rooming house.

While researching items for BAHA's revised edition (2009) of the *41 Walking Tours* book, I began to question this story. The land grant underlying José Domingo Peralta's share of Rancho San Antonio, which included most of present-day Berkeley, was not approved until 1855. Most of it was sold to investors in 1852, as shown in Kellersberger's Map, so any other claim of ownership in these years is dubious. It is not reasonable to believe that Bowen established a business at Delaware and San Pablo in 1853 or 1854, and there is no record to prove that. Other businesses there, such as Jacob's Landing, were on property not included in Julius Kellersberger's plots, so that they could deal directly with the owner, Peralta. But the most incongruous item is the structure's appearance in the photo that Pettitt published. This building, with all its brackets and broken pediment on the front gable, and storm shutters on the upper windows, does not look as if it were built in the 1850s. Compare it with the photo of Jacob's house on the same page of Pettitt's book, and the schoolhouse on the previous page, which are better-known 1850s structures, and Pettitt's assertion doesn't seem correct. Let's take a look at the records that are now available and try to update the story.

Captain William J. Bowen

Bowen is listed in Hubert Howe Bancroft's *California Pioneer Register and Index, 1542–1848*, which states that he came to California in 1847 from Honolulu, engaged in mining, and then the lumber trade. It further states that in 1882, Bowen had been a resident of Berkeley "for many years."

On June 19, 1855, Capt. William J. Bowen purchased lot K of Block 30 in the town of San Leandro from the Estudillo family. At the time, this southern part of Alameda County was the center of the county's population. The first county seat was at Alvarado in 1853, then moved to San Leandro in 1855, and finally to Oakland in the early 1870s. The Estudillo land grant was approved in 1855, the town of San Leandro subdivided, land sold and recorded. It is not known what Bowen did in San Leandro, or how long he remained.

In December 1859, Bowen leased two four-acre parcels from José Domingo Peralta. The two leases, which are written in Spanish by Peralta, cannot be used to identify the location, because the references are to hills and valleys along San Pablo [Road], although one lease mentions Bowen's house. The leases were for five years at one peso per year per acre. On the 1860 U.S. Census, Bowen stated the value of his real estate was \$300. Since he didn't own the land, this was the value of his "house," which must have been very modest. It is likely that one of these leases was for land outside the plots mapped by Kellersberger in 1852. The block that Bowen eventually — Virginia, Tenth, Delaware, and San Pablo—was bisected east-west by what was known as the Carpentier Line. South of the line was Plot 65, above that was land that had not been surveyed.

On March 29, 1864, Bowen purchased land from Alfred L. Pioche for \$880. The deed also used vague descriptions: beginning at the western line of San Pablo Road and the deep gulch, thence north nine chains, etc. But the deed does mention that it was a portion of Plot 65, west of San Pablo, and the block between Virginia and Delaware is about nine chains long. The land was then described as running 27 chains west of San Pablo, which would be down to about Fourth Street.

On May 8, 1874, the Berkeley Land and Town Improvement Association (BLTIA) sold Block 61 (Virginia, Tenth, Delaware, San Pablo) of their tract to Bowen for \$4,500. Three days later, the BLTIA borrowed \$500 from Bowen. The purpose of these instruments is not known. The BLTIA subdivided most of Berkeley west of San Pablo, and many deals were made. One possible interpretation is that the BLTIA paid for all the land, and then sold back a portion to Bowen, leaving them with the remaining land to sell off.

On the 1860 U.S. Census, Bowen listed his occupation as farmer, and the value of his real estate at \$300. It does not seem obvious that Bowen was operating an inn. He was probably farming on the land he had leased from Peralta. His household included a wife, Maria (Mary Ann), a laborer, and a cook. There were no boarders.

On the 1870 U.S. Census, Bowen gave his occupation as grocer, and he owned real estate valued at \$10,000 (which included land and improvements). His household was the same as in 1860. By this date, Bowen had changed professions, though two laborers hardly constituted a hotel or inn. In September 1872, the Berkeley Post Office was established at the Ocean View House, and it was most likely because he was on the main stagecoach route along the east side of the San Francisco Bay. Pay was based on sales, and in 1875 Bowen only made \$10 as postmaster.

On the 1880 U.S. Census, Bowen's occupation was listed as coal dealer, and his family suddenly exploded with four children. The oldest son was born in Ireland, and most likely was from a previous marriage by Mary Ann, who was also born in Ireland. But two of the children—a son, W.J. Bowen, and a daughter, Jane—were born in California and were more than ten years old, yet they did not appear on the 1870 census. Also in this year, Bowen was renting rooms to the well-known shoe manufacturer Daniel R. Wentworth and his family.

In 1876, Bowen was still selling groceries, though the next year he formed a partnership with Charles Brown, and they sold coal, grain and hay. It seems that Bowen stopped selling groceries, but retained the rooming house operation where Wentworth lodged.

The available assessment records for Berkeley begin in 1878. In that year, Bowen was not assessed for improvements. In 1879, he was assessed \$1000 for improvements, and thereafter \$500 per year. It is likely that he simply escaped the 1878 assessment. If Bowen sold out his grocery business, it's more likely that he sold his stock and goodwill, not the building.

An early resident of the area, Wilhelmine Bolsted Cianciarulo, remembered that first-grade students were moved from the old school at San Pablo and Virginia to the building on the northwest corner of San Pablo and Delaware in 1884. The students occupied the part of the building formerly used as a trading post and Post Office, while the Bowen family continued to live in the back portion of the building and upstairs. Clearly, the original building was still on its original site in the mid-1880s.

When Capt. Bowen died in 1887, the *Berkeley Herald* stated that he died in the house he had built many years before. Bowen's widow continued to live in the former Ocean View House until about 1895. Beginning that year, there were no longer any assessed improvements where the Ocean View House had stood. In the summer of 1895, Mary Ann Bowen gave her daughter, Jane, now married to George Phillips, a lot just north of where Bowen's house had stood. Immediately, Berkeley contractor John Spencer built a large Victorian house there that stood until it was demolished in 1964 and replaced with the Bonanza Motel. Mary Ann lived with her daughter until at least 1899. It is not known when or where Mary Ann died.

In 1922, an article appeared in the *Berkeley Daily Gazette* that stated that the Bowen house was an old-fashioned structure, which was to be sold to Fred

Rawson but was later demolished. Fred Rawson was a Deputy Constable in Berkeley from the mid-1890s to the early 1900s, lived in West Berkeley, and occasionally put on a trained dog show. The timeline fits, and it looks like the Ocean View House was razed in the 1890s.

Captain James S. Higgins

James S. Higgins was, like Bowen, a master mariner from Massachusetts. He arrived in California in 1849 and brought his family out in 1851 to live in San Francisco. He operated cargo and passenger ships on the California coast.

On June 1, 1874, the BLTIA sold the southwest corner of San Pablo and Delaware to James S. Higgins for \$425. Bowen and Higgins do not appear in the Oakland directory for 1875, but a lot of other people in the Berkeley area were not listed either. Bowen and Higgins both appear in the 1876 directory, however, and both were grocers. So Higgins built his store sometime between the summer of 1874 and 1876. It is likely that Higgins' wife ran the store, because he continued operating ships in the Bay Area shipping trade. It is not likely that Higgins bought Bowen's building, since they were both in the grocery business in 1876, and Bowen's old post office was a classroom in 1884.

In January 1893, Higgins sold his "temperance" grocery store to Samuel Heywood, son of Berkeley pioneer Zimri Heywood. Sam's son, Frank Heywood, had just finished business school, and Sam was setting him up in business. They moved the Higgins grocery store down the street to the southeast corner of Fifth and Delaware, and opened the Heywood & Son grocery business. That's where the building was when the picture published in Pettitt's book was taken. By March 1893, the *Berkeley Daily Advocate* reported that the company was successful and even ran a temperance grocery as Higgins had, "Selling no liquors, cigars or tobacco...."

Capt. Higgins died in April 1894. Even though he was 78 years old, he was still sailing his ship. He slipped and fell from a gangplank while docked at San Francisco, and died a few days later. He had built a larger house just south of his grocery store on San Pablo Avenue, where he lived until his death. Right across the street, on the southeast corner of San Pablo and Delaware, the Raspiller Brewery was built and opened in 1894. Temperance was no longer the rule at this intersection.

Sometime in late 1911 or 1912, Dante and Caroline Sormani purchased the old Higgins grocery and moved it to its current location at 824 Delaware Street. Sales contracts for structures were not recorded, and there were no building permits issued for the move. However, by 1913, the Sormanis were listed in the assessment records as the owners of the lot and improvements. Dante Sormani presumably used at least part of the storefront for his barbershop.

By 1927, the Sormanis were no longer in Berkeley. The old grocery store was then passed through several owners, becoming a church at one point. Although the

building's interior was remodeled in 1985 by architect Bart Jones, the exterior is still the grocery store built by James S. Higgins c. 1875.

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