

Mary J. Berg House 2517 Regent Street

HISTORY OF THE SITE AND NEIGHBORHOOD

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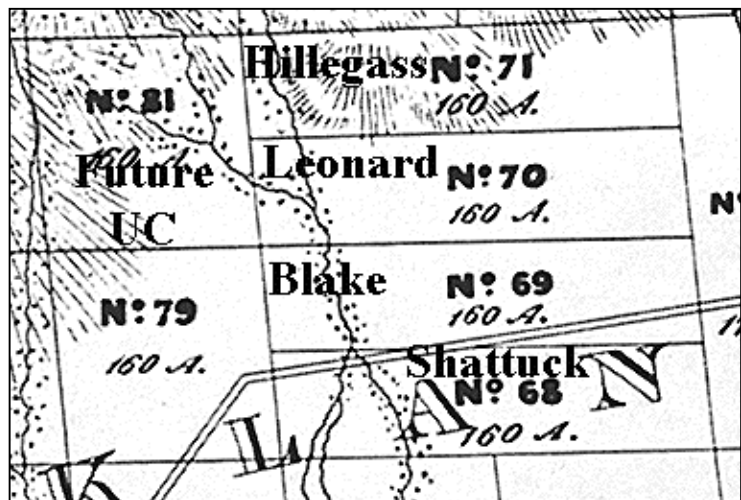
The early history of 2517 Regent Street is part of the larger story of the founding and growth of the University of California and the city of Berkeley, as well as the influence of public transportation and the 1906 earthquake and fire.

Its more recent history is linked to the sudden population increase during WWII and the huge influx of students taking advantage of the GI Bill after the war, resulting in an extensive UC/City of Berkeley redevelopment program beginning the early 1950s that rebuilt blocks of the South-of-Campus (Southside) neighborhood and that continues today.

Early History

2517 Regent Street is located in the Hillegass Tract No. 3, part of the 160 acres (Plot 71 on the 1857 survey map of The Ranchos of Vicente & Domingo Peralta by Julius Kellersberger) purchased (petitioned for) by William Hillegass (1826–1876) in 1852.¹

Figure 1. Portion of the Kellersberger Map showing the land holdings of four Berkeley pioneers.



¹ Cerny, Susan D. *Berkeley Landmarks*, Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association, 2001, p. 85. Pettitt, George A. *Berkeley: the Town and Gown of It*. Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1973, p. 23.

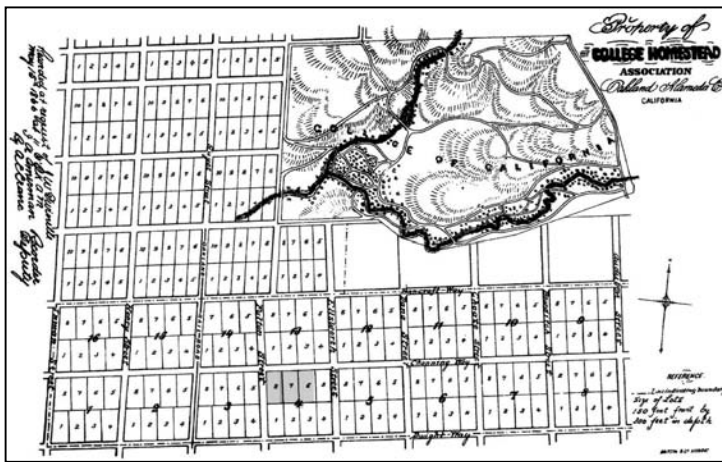


Figure 2. 1866 College Homestead Tract Subdivision Map

In 1858, the College of California, the private precursor to the University of California, purchased the land along Strawberry Creek from Orin Simmons. The new campus site was dedicated at Founders' Rock in 1860.²

To finance the construction of campus buildings, the College of California established the College Homestead Association in 1864 to

purchase property south of Strawberry Creek, subdivide and sell it. (Figure 2) The 160-acre tract, stretching from College (Audubon) to MLK (Grove) and Bancroft to Dwight, was recorded in 1866.³

In the late 1860s, Hillegass began building a country home (on the current site of Kroeber Hall) and sold 53 acres of his land to the College. His remaining land south of Dwight Way was leased to tenant farmers.⁴

The University of California was established by the State legislature in 1868 and merged with the College of California. Just a year later, the Schools for the Deaf and Blind opened at the top of Dwight Way. By 1873, when the first classes were held on the new University campus, Berkeley's population was around 200.

Growth of the City and the University

After a spur line of the Central (later Southern) Pacific Railroad opened along Shattuck Avenue in 1876, the town began to grow rapidly, and by 1878, when Berkeley incorporated as a city, the population had grown to 2000.

During the 1880s and 1890s, both the University and the city's population grew. The introduction of electric streetcar lines made transportation convenient. The College Homestead Tract was sold to various investors and re-subdivided several times.

In 1886, more than ten years after Hillegass' death, his widow had the remaining land mapped and subdivided. The first map included just the one block from Dwight to Parker. Subdivision maps recorded in 1888—extended the subdivision to Derby, and in 1889 — extended it to Russell. Regent Street, which at that time extended from

² Helfand, Harvey. *University of California, Berkeley: the Campus Guide*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002.

³ Helfand, p. 4.

⁴ Sulliger, Jerry. "William Hillegass: The story of the Hillegass land." *Beautiful Benvenue, Elegant Hillegass*. Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association, 2008.

Dwight Way to Ashby Avenue, was called Manoa Avenue until 1903 (the name change was noted in the 1904 city directory).

The expanding population contributed to such development in many parts of Berkeley.⁵

In the late 1880s and 1890s, building activity in the tract took place mostly along Dwight Way. The George Edwards House at 2530 Dwight Way (A.H. Broad, 1886. Landmark #224, 1998)⁶ was among the first houses constructed in the tract. The blocks to the south remained undeveloped until realtor Joseph J. Mason brought in Anson Blake to pave the streets.⁷ In 1899, Berkeley capitalist John Hinkel, in response to a plea by Mason, built four speculative houses on the 2500 block of Hillegass Avenue, and these sold very quickly, stimulating other sales and accelerated building activity.⁸

By 1900, Berkeley's population had grown to approximately 13,000 and then exploded to 40,000 within four years after the 1906 Earthquake and Fire.⁹

In its issue of 25 May 1901, the *Berkeley Gazette* reported that the "heretofore quiet and unassuming neighborhood near Dwight Way and Telegraph has evolved into a busy and disquieting scene of commercial activity." With the exception of one house near Parker Street, the 2500 block of Regent Street was not developed until the first half-decade of the 20th century.¹⁰



The rapid growth of the population stimulated economic, building, and social development. By 1915, Berkeley's population was nearly 60,000. The South-of-Campus neighborhood in the vicinity of 2517 Regent Street had become a nearly fully built residential neighborhood, and there were 16 houses on the block.¹¹

Changes to the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries built environment in the South-of-Campus neighborhood began after World War I.

On many blocks, single-family houses began being divided into rooming houses, multiple units, or demolished for larger multi-unit housing or institutional buildings. The majority of changes occurred along Telegraph Avenue and the blocks closest to campus, as the University and Berkeley's population continued to grow.

⁵ Willes, Burl, editor. *Picturing Berkeley: A Postcard History*. Berkeley: BAHA & BHS, 2002. p. 116.

⁶ Cerny, p. 237.

⁷ Sulliger, Jerry. "William Hillegass."

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ —A History of Berkeley, Berkeley Art Center Exhibit Catalogue, 1978, p. 31.

¹⁰ Sanborn Insurance Map, 1903.

¹¹ Sanborn Insurance Map, 1911.

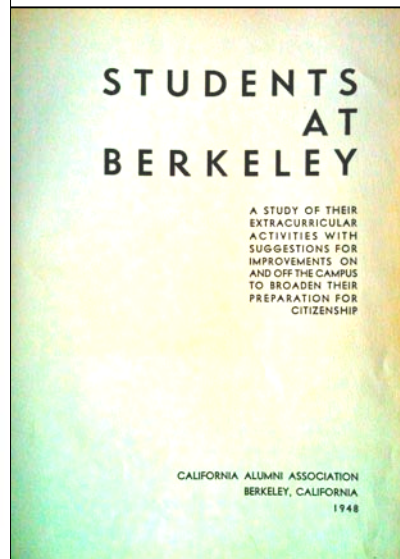
But on this 2500 block of Regent Street, Sanborn maps show that between 1911 and 1929, there were only two changes in the block's composition. The Chinese mission building disappeared from 2504 Regent Street, leaving an empty lot that has been used as a parking lot ever since, and in 1924, the first large apartment building, containing 17 units, was built on a previously empty lot at 2535 Regent Street.

World War II and its impact on South-of-Campus

The most significant changes to the South-of-Campus area and the 2500 block of Regent Street occurred during and after World War II. Wartime shipyard workers were often accommodated in subdivided houses. Later, veterans benefiting from the GI Bill poured into the University, and the student population soared. With an increased demand for student housing, the large older homes were often converted into flats or rooming houses.



By 1944, a campus planning office, the Office of Architects and Engineers, was established, with Robert J. Evans as director.¹² The Alumni Association published a report in 1948 that proposed several alternatives for housing 8,000 students in “elevator” buildings. The report is filled with photos showing the substandard old housing that currently housed the majority of students.



¹² Helfand, p. 25, and interview with Robert J. Evans, February 15, 2013.

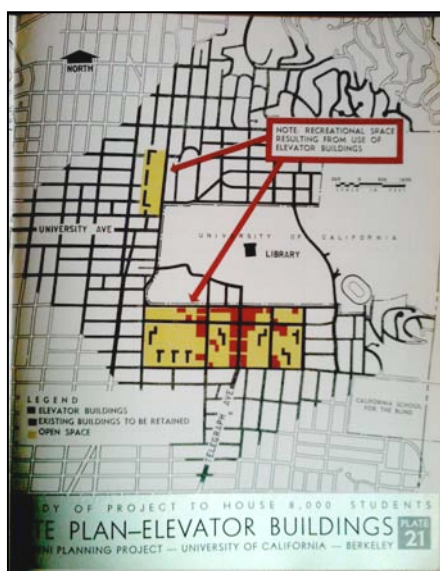


Figure 7. The 1948 map illustrates that with the exception of the red rectangles (Telegraph/Bancroft commercial buildings and some churches) the concept was to demolish every building from College to Oxford and Dwight to Bancroft. This has partially been realized.

In partnership with the city of Berkeley, a redevelopment plan was created that enabled the University to acquire property in the South-of-Campus area. "...the City Renewal Agency had conditioned its designation of blight on the 'sociology' of the place, which had changed from single family to multiple occupants, without the necessary 'physical' change."¹³

The 1951 plan also estimated 40 to 50 acres of additional land would be required for expansion, if the open space and the values of the existing campus were to be preserved. Most of this expansion was to be dedicated to residential halls that would "be built to the maximum height permissible." While seeking to protect the openness of the historic campus, the plan advocated the demolition of older buildings, with only a few exceptions.¹⁴

The University's redevelopment plans did not dramatically affect the 2500 block of Regent Street until four large apartment buildings replaced four historic houses (built between 1901 and 1905) on the east side of the street between 1958 and 1966: 2521 Regent (1958); 2525 Regent (1963); 2537 Regent (1966), 2541 Regent (1962). On the west side of the street, 2510 Regent (1965), was built on a vacant lot.

The fire station at 2542 Regent Street was sold in July 1962¹⁵ and the following year an apartment building was constructed on the site. Next door, the Gorman house at 2546 Regent Street was razed to make way for the Gorman furniture store's parking lot.¹⁶

Conclusion

Nearly half of the buildings that stood on the 2500 block of Regent Street in 1911 have been demolished and replaced by apartment buildings. Today there are ten apartment buildings just on the 2500 block of Regent. In the immediate neighborhood to the north of Dwight Way entire blocks of late 19th- and early 20th-century buildings, mostly residential, have been demolished and replaced.

The Berg House contributes a significant element to the remaining historic fabric on the 2500 block of Regent Street block as the oldest surviving house on the block. It is the oldest and has the most intact façade in a row of four surviving houses The Berg House

¹³ Allen, Peter. The End of Modernism? People's Park, Urban Renewal, and Community Design. *JSAH: Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 70, N. 3, p. 354-374 (September 2011).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

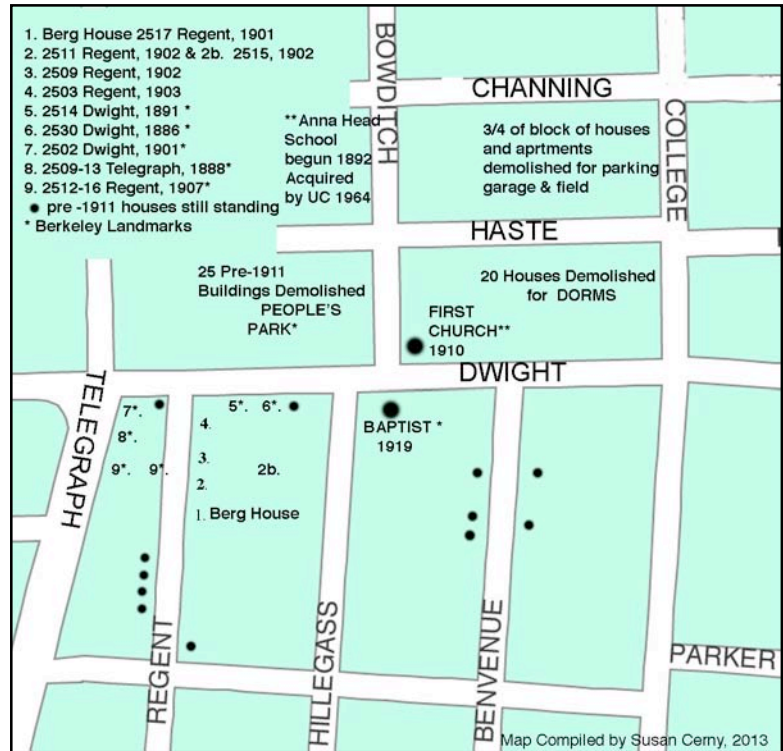
¹⁵ "Fire Station Site Sold to Developer." *Oakland Tribune*, 18 July 1962.

¹⁶ Source: City of Berkeley Building Permit Records.

and its neighbors also contribute by proximity to the historic fabric of 2500 block of Dwight Way across from People’s Park. Additionally, the commercial/residential King Building (a City of Berkeley Landmark) at the corner of Telegraph and Dwight, built the same year as the Berg House, originally served the immediate residential community as a corner dry-goods store.

The remaining historic structures, all representing the first “footprint” of development in the immediate neighborhood, contribute to the sense of historic continuity, and several of them have already been designated City of Berkeley Landmarks.¹⁷ These buildings have significant educational value for the majority of the area’s residents, who are university students.

As is one of the few remaining early 20th-century buildings still standing in the Southside neighborhood, the Berg House makes a significant contribution to the history of its neighborhood and particularly to the streetscapes surrounding the First Church of Christ, Scientist, Berkeley’s only National Landmark (the highest honor a building can achieve in the United States).



¹⁷ Needham-Obata Building (1907), the Soda Water Works Building (E.A. Spalding, 1888), the King Building (Albert Dodge Coplin, 1901), the Alexander C. Stuart House (Pissis & Moore, 1891), and the George Edwards House (A.H. Broad, 1886). Cerny, *Berkeley Landmarks*. BAHA. Berkeley Landmarks website: http://berkeleyheritage.com/berkeley_landmarks/landmarks.html.