

Home is where the history is



The Holly Park Meat Market at 231 Cortland St., in the Bernal Heights neighborhood of San Francisco.

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Michael Nolan's home on a rolling block in San Francisco's Bernal Heights is filled with the past. Black-and-white photos from his youth hang on the walls and family keepsakes sit on shelves, but they're mixed in with neighborhood artifacts, like railroad tools from the late 1800s found buried in Nolan's backyard.

A passionate genealogist and the convenor of his family reunions, Nolan is now focused on building a different kind of family tree: the genealogy of his house.

Nolan, 73, is one of many Bernal Heights residents hooked on recording the history of their homes and the neighborhood. Some homeowners might conduct this type of research during a renovation, to replicate the design features original to the property. But these self-made historians want to connect the present with the past, when neighbors were close friends and felt a strong sense of community.

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"We're pretty tight on this block," said Nolan, who helps organize annual block parties and regular potluck dinners. "We try to support one another in times of celebration and need. It's not easy to do. ... People lead very busy lives. We do what we can on this little piece of earth."

Bernal Heights lies between highways 101 and 280 near San Francisco's Mission District. More than 24,000 residents live in this colorful community filled with coffee shops, restaurants and views from every hilltop. The area contained few homes until the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, when many were drawn to build on its stable bedrock. Now a dozen earthquake shacks, which were used as temporary housing after the 1906 quake, sit near modern, contemporary homes interspersed with updated Victorians and smaller, old cottages built in the late 1800s.

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Residents are protective of the historic charm of this neighborhood, which housed early immigrants and residents who relocated to the area after the 1906 quake.

When the owner of a 100-year-old Victorian on Manchester Street received permission to demolish the property in 2003, several residents formed the Bernal Heights Preservation Project to save the building from destruction. They sued the city for violating its charter, which banned demolitions in the

district with limited exceptions, and won. The group later renamed itself Bernal History Project, and they meet once a month at the Bernal Heights branch of the public library for a show-and-tell session of what they've learned about their homes and the neighborhood. Some create slide shows of their findings and bring in artifacts they've discovered in their homes, like the diary of a hapless teenage boy named Henry, who lived on Elsie Street in the 1930s.

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"He fell in love with a girl across the street who didn't know he existed," says Vicky Walker, 47, one of the first participants of the Bernal History Project. Walker helped transcribe the diary, which ends with the words, "I got drunk and sit in Elizebeth steps 1 hr. in the rain."

According to the diary, Henry had met Elizabeth six months prior and was immediately smitten: "Moved up on Elsie St. And I met a very nice girl her name is Elizebeth Hird she is a blonde and I like her very much in fact I love her."

Nolan has lived on Elsie Street for more than 20 years. In 2006, a visit from an elderly woman who had lived in the home in the late 1930s spurred him to research her family's genealogy. But when the U.S. Census results from 1940 were made public in 2012 after a mandatory 72-year waiting period, allowing anyone to do an online search based on their neighborhood, Nolan and other residents on his street turned into home history super sleuths. During regular potluck dinners, neighbors would share and compare their findings, such as who had lived in the home and what they did for a living. In 1940, for example, a family of eight lived in Nolan's tiny two-bedroom home. He believes the home wasn't equipped with a bathroom and that the family had to rely on an outhouse.

Nolan is spearheading an effort to uncover the history of the homes on the 200 block of Elsie Street and nearby streets. Another Bernal Heights resident, Tim Mullen, designed and produced plaques that indicate when the home was built, who has lived there since 1900, where the residents came from and what they did for a living. They hope to have eight plaques completed this spring. A prototype hangs from Nolan's fence at 212 Elsie. "People stop by all the time. ... It's almost like a museum piece."

As part of his research, Nolan often finds himself walking back and forth between the Main Library and City Hall. "The ground floor of City Hall is the assessor's office, and you can look in old books, and you can also look at microfilm to see the sales ledgers of who owned a house when it was sold. It takes a bit of work, but there's lots of helpful people."

The History Center at the Main Library is a home researcher's dream, filled with archives and other materials to assist those interested in the history of city buildings. "It's good to do online research, but sometimes you want to put your hands on a book and leap through the pages," added Nolan.

Neighbor Jonathan Bennett, 32, is helping Nolan with his research. To date, he says he's spent more than 40 hours investigating 37 buildings and their stories, including his own 1911 home, where he lives with his wife and newborn son. "It's fun, and it's been catch-as-catch-can and a little detective work, cross-referencing one record with another," says Bennett.

Walker lives on Ellsworth Street just a few blocks from Nolan and Bennett, and she's equally immersed in learning about her home. Walker has traced the name of every owner of the Ellsworth Street residence, which was built in 1927. Her first bit of data came in 2003 on the day she moved into the home. Her husband, Wade Walker, was unloading the moving van when a neighbor came by and shared an unexpected gruesome detail: The property was the site of a 1976 husband-wife murder-suicide.

Vicky Walker was fascinated. "I'm kind of a gore hound, and I'm interested in

ghosts and crimes and stuff," she says. She later visited the library where she researched The San Francisco Chronicle archives and located stories about the crime. She learned that the wife, Lovera "Jodie" Satava, was fond of cats, just like Walker. "I'd be talking out loud to Jodie and saying, 'I hope you like the cats.' It's like having ghosts you can talk to."

Not every visitor to her home is as enchanted. "People will come over and ask, 'How can you live where something terrible happened?'" says Walker. "The house doesn't have those vibes. After Jodie and (husband) Marvin lived there, there were lots of other families and couples that lived there. It just has a different vibe."

For Bennett, whose home happily lacks the dramatic events of Walker's residence, researching the history of his property has added an emotional attachment to the space.

"Other people called this structure a home, raised kids, and we're continuing to do that," he said. "I'd like to think that in 40, 50, 60 years, that there there might be someone looking at the history of the block or who has neighbors that knew us or grew up with our son. You kind of think about what people might think about in the future and that you're participating in that."

"We get to be the stewards for moments of time."

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Tips for researching

your home's history

If you know when your home was built, you can easily trace its ownership history. It's up to you to decide how much of the puzzle you want to piece together.

Confirm the year your home was built by contacting your city's planning department. Sometimes you'll even be able to find out the name of the architect or even get your hands on the early blueprints if they have them on record. You can also visit your county's assessor-recorder's office to determine who held deeds to your home in the past.

Visit your local or main library, which may archive old city phone books, maps, newspapers, and other memorabilia to help you learn about your home. You'll also want to find out if your town has a historical or preservation society, which may also serve as the keeper of these materials.

Start with early reverse phone directories of your town, which allow you to look up a street address to see who lived in your home. Create a timeline of home ownership through the years.

Once you have names of previous homeowners, use an online genealogy site like Ancestry.com to help you create profiles of the people who lived in your home. The subscription-based services allows you online access to pre-1941 U.S. Census records, birth, marriage and death certificates.

Find out if your town has any neighborhood preservation groups and visit their websites. Even if it's not for your neighborhood, you could learn details about bordering communities that could help you with your own research.

Do you have any neighbors who've lived on your street for a long time? See if they are willing to share their memories of your neighborhood.