

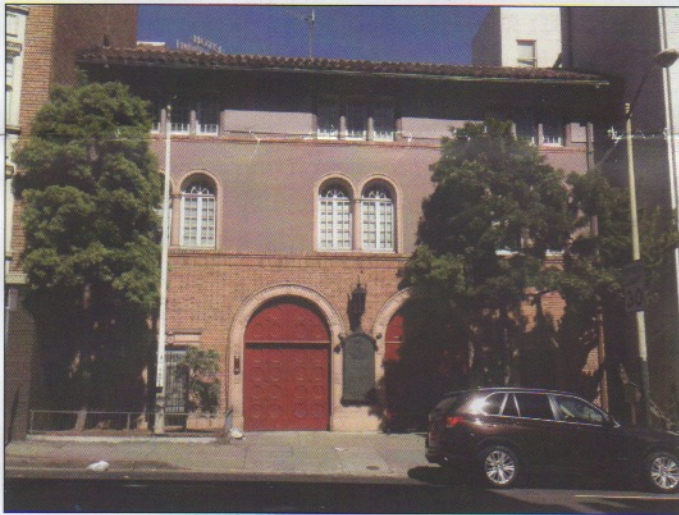
THE DENNIS SULLIVAN MEMORIAL HOME

By HUDSON BELL

Nob Hill historian Hudson Bell is owner of Fern Hill Tours and a NHA Board member. Bell leads regular walking tours on the Hill.

This year NHA members enjoyed a tour of San Francisco Fire Department Station 41 on Leavenworth Street, between Clay and Washington. As well, folks on the walking tour got a close-up view of the Jones Street Tank, a key component of the SFFD's auxiliary water system. When talking about the history of Nob Hill, the Earthquake and Fires of 1906 take center stage, when fire turned grandiose mansions about the hill to ash. Given this, and that another firefighter from Station 41 is to be honored by the NHA this holiday season, here's the story of an oft-overlooked building on the hill tied to the SFFD and this part of San Francisco's history.

Dennis Thomas Sullivan was born in New York on Nov. 2, 1852. In his mid-20s, Sullivan moved to San Francisco and worked as a blacksmith on Polk Street while residing up the hill at 1313 California St., a block or so down from the newly built Charles Crocker mansion (where Grace Cathedral is today). Around 1880, Sullivan started working as a stoker



for SFFD Engine No. 2, and throughout the 1880s worked for the SFFD as a blacksmith and hydrant inspector. By the beginning of the 1890s, however, Sullivan moved into the role of First Assistant Chief Engineer. At this time, he and his wife Margaret moved to 412 Bush St., between Kearny and Grant, into the top floor of SFFD Station 2. In 1893, after the death of Chief David Scannell, Sullivan was promoted to Chief Engineer. At 40, he was San Francisco's youngest fire chief.

At the end of 1892, Sullivan told the San Francisco Call, "We've been lucky so far, and haven't had any of these great big fires. Someday one of them will come along and then the city will realize what a great mistake it is to keep an 1892 Fire Department on an 1878 appropriation." After Sullivan extinguished his first major fire after becoming chief, the Call reported, "When the excitement died down, and people began

to look about them, they realized that in acting as he had done Chief Sullivan had saved millions of dollars worth of property, and prevented untold suffering, to say nothing of probable loss of life." Likewise, following a blaze at Geary and Market in 1894, the Chronicle reported, "Chief Sullivan has certainly shown the very best judgment in handling his men and machines at the largest fire during his term as Chief Engineer."



In June 1895, after a massive fire that wasted blocks of the South of Market district, Sullivan said, "I have long been directing the attention of the Supervisors and the citizens to what would happen in the event of a big fire if the department was not provided with better facilities for its work. The people have just seen my prediction verified. It has been a very expensive lesson." In 1898, in a bit of foreshadowing, a fire started next door to Station 2 on Bush Street, issuing from the California Hotel and Theatre. The Call reported, "The firemen have suffered somewhat from smoke and water which found



a way into their quarters from the stable adjoining, damaging the clothing and bedding of the men. While the quarters of Chief Sullivan on the upper floor were thoroughly soaked and perfumed, the gallant Chief is too much of a fire hero to complain. The only grievance he has is that his parrot got a dose of stifling smoke and an occasional shower from the spray of the water thrown on the building."

Sullivan was a fireman's firefighter. "Dennis Sullivan was loved by his men," writes Dennis Smith in his book *San Francisco is Burning*. "To them, he was not only the chief but also a genuinely great man, and San Francisco's firemen took their assessment of others as seriously as they took anything in their lives." In 1903, the Oakland Tribune reported, "Sullivan has the reputation of being one of the greatest firemen in the

world. The insurance companies would not tolerate his removal for a moment.”

On the morning of April 18, 1906 when the Great Earthquake struck San Francisco at 5:12am, Sullivan and his wife were asleep on the top floor of the Bush Street firehouse. Next door, the California Hotel and Theatre --- a massive, brick Victorian-Romanesque structure with two tall, Queen Anne-style towers with connected chimneys --- buckled and shook down. Its eastern tower fell onto Station 2 sending Sullivan and his wife down through the building. Sullivan was fatally injured, and died four days later at a hospital in the Presidio. Amazingly, Margaret was basically unscathed, and survived.



As the day of April 18, 1906 wore on however, and various fires were spotted around the city, Sullivan's absence loomed as if the Sun had failed to appear one morning. While Assistant Fire Chiefs Dougherty and Shaughnessy stepped in and did what they could, the gap in leadership opened up the possibility for what happened when U. S. Army General Frederick Funston took charge at Mayor Eugene Schmitz's approval, basically declaring martial law, and ordering troops from the Presidio and Fort Mason into the city. As well, while Sullivan had studied blasting techniques as an engineer, especially after the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904, Funston's men didn't know what they were doing, and therefore when blasting created more-and-more fires. For the next three days these fires joined into one huge conflagration that basically razed all of Old San Francisco east of Van Ness Avenue. This was, and remains, the largest conflagration in the world to affect a metropolitan area outside of wartime.

As San Francisco rebuilt itself, there was talk of erecting a memorial to Chief Sullivan, but it didn't come to fruition until 15 years later when at the beginning of the Roaring Twenties, the Dennis Sullivan Memorial Home was built on the south slope of Nob Hill at 870 Bush St., between Mason and Taylor. Completed in 1922, the Mediterranean Revival home was designed by City Architect John Reid Jr., who had previously

worked as a draftsman for Daniel Burnham and Willis Polk. A plaque with the visage of Sullivan and a dedicatory verse by George Sterling was created by M. Earl Cummings and placed between two, bronze firehouse-like garage doors. At the dedication on March 16, 1922, keys of the home were given to Fire Chief Thomas Murphy, and it thereafter became home to Murphy and all subsequent active SFFD fire chiefs. Chief Joanne Hayes-White does not currently live there, though if she wanted to she could. The last SFFD chief to live in the home was Mario Trevino in 2004. Due to this, the home is currently used for SFFD administration purposes.

NHA NOB HILL WALKING TOUR

This year, Hudson Bell began guiding a 2-hour walking tour of the Nob Hill neighborhood for NHA members. The tour explores some of Nob Hill's lesser known alleys and streets while telling the story of the neighborhood's development from post-gold rush suburb to the present day. Throughout the tour, Hudson shares information gleaned while working on his book, *Fern Hill: the Lost History of San Francisco's Nob Hill*.

If you are interested in taking this tour, please send Hudson an email at HUDSON@fernhilltours.com. You will be alerted when the tour is next available. The 2-hour tour is \$20/person, of which a portion will go to the Nob Hill Association.

Visit the website <http://www.fernhilltimes.com>

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