

# The Tall Tree

MARCH 2013  
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NEWSLETTER of the PALO ALTO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

GENERAL MEETING \* FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC \* REFRESHMENTS SERVED

Sunday, March 3 at 2:00 – 4:00 PM  
Lucie Stern Community Center, Palo Alto  
1305 Middlefield Road

*Speaker: John Morrow Hackmann, PAHA President*

## Poisoned Again!

### The Cover-up and Murder of Jane Lathrop Stanford

FEBRUARY 28, 1905 DATES THE MURDER OF JANE LATHROP STANFORD. Was the cover-up propriety or conspiracy? Her death hysteria or strychnine? Coronary rupture... or cold-blooded murder? Guided by the detailed investigation of Stanford medical faculty member Dr. Robert W. P. Cutler's 2003 study, *The Mysterious Death of Jane Stanford* (Stanford University Press), Prof. Hackmann, an attorney, reopens the cold case file on the circumstances of that great lady's death.



*Jane Lathrop Stanford, 1828–1905  
(Wikipedia Commons, photographer unknown)*

After a Hawaii inquest in which Mrs. Stanford was dissected, organs pureed, and she was unanimously pronounced to be the victim of strychnine poisoning, why did Stanford's president Dr. Jordan insist on a seventh opinion, and pay very handsomely for a dissenting report which was never made publicly available?

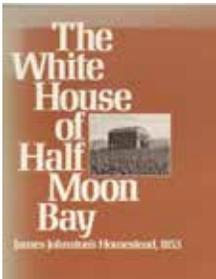
Why was a previous incident involving rat poison in a water bottle swept under the carpet by a private investigator? Was Mrs. Stanford, with her eccentric love of Spiritualism, really so delusional as to hallucinate her way into a hypochondriac strychnine death, complete with all the symptoms? Why did President David Starr Jordan want the cause of death changed to "heart failure" and then later write a book, *The Story of a Good Woman: Jane*

*Stanford Lathrop...?????* How was her death reported? How did Stanford and Palo Alto react? Join us to hear speaker John Morrow Hackmann probe with a deft hand into these mysteries.

# The James Johnston House



*The White House of Half Moon Bay, courtesy of June Morrall*



*The White House of Half Moon Bay book jacket, and a picture of the house before restoration, courtesy of June Morrall*

A FRIEND RECENTLY SENT ME A POSTCARD OF THE JAMES JOHNSTON HOUSE with the caption, “The White House of Half Moon Bay.” A Google search led me on a fascinating journey (link after link) into who was James Johnston, the story of his house, and some interesting glimpses into early California history. A Scottish immigrant and California pioneer, he sailed to San Francisco in 1849 just in time to become a partner in the thriving El Dorado Saloon and invest in real estate.

He bought land in 1853 from Guadalupe Briones, the widow of Candelario Miramontes and the sister of Juana Briones who was prominent as the owner of the 4,400-acre ranch, part of which is now in Palo Alto, and a resident of Mayfield, which also became part of Palo Alto in the 1920s. Johnson had married Petra Maria de Jara in 1852, and the “white house” he constructed soon became their home which they filled with children. Petra’s mother, Ursula Venezuela, known as “Melita” or “little mother” joined them, as did James’ sister, Isabel. Johnston’s wealth enabled him to furnish his classic, New England style saltbox house elegantly. They celebrated a gala housewarming there in 1855. The house became an architectural and cultural landmark. However, the house fell into ruin after the death of James Johnston.

June Morrall described its deserted, derelict status in the 1970s: “Its wood was gray and weathered.... The neighbor kids told me a ghost lived there....” Ms Morrall learned of a movement among local residents to “develop” the old farmhouse.

Cultural historian C. Malcolm Watkins was fascinated with the story that blended the histories of James and Petra, a “marital union that epitomized old California.” He researched and published *The White House of Half Moon Bay* in 1972 and supported the Johnston House Foundation. Petra Cooper, a descendant of the Johnstons was excited and enthusiastic about the restoration of the historic landmark. The completion of the restoration was celebrated in 2005, 150 years after the original housewarming. The “White House of Half Moon Bay” is recognized on the National Historic Register. For more information on the property and on tours of it, call (650-726-0329) or visit [www.johnstonhouse.org](http://www.johnstonhouse.org). —by Peggy McKee, editor

## Spectacular Public Murals

At Stanford in December Robert Cherney spoke about the artist Victor Arnautoff who has a connection to Palo Alto and the Palo Alto History Museum to be housed in the Roth Building at 300 Homer Avenue. Born in Ukraine in 1896, Arnautoff served in Tsar Nicholas II’s army during World War I. He fled the Bolshevik Revolution eventually ending up in the United States, 1925. He attended art school in San Francisco as well as studying in Mexico under muralist Diego Rivera. Professor Cherny chronicled Arnautoff’s “spectacular public murals,” created in the “expressive social protest-style” of the 1930s. Arnautoff was technical director of the Coit Tower murals project ([www.artandarchitecture-sf.com/tag/victor-arnautoff](http://www.artandarchitecture-sf.com/tag/victor-arnautoff)). But it was Dr. Russell Lee, co-founder of the Palo Alto Medical Clinic, who commissioned Arnautoff’s first major California work in 1932, a celebration of the progress of medicine in the 20th century. “The Exam,” part of the Roth Building mural set, is said to have caused traffic jams when it first appeared in the 1930s (to see more of Arnautoff’s Roth Building murals, visit [www.homeravenue.com/Victor\\_Arnautoff.htm](http://www.homeravenue.com/Victor_Arnautoff.htm)).

To learn more about the Roth Building, future home of the Palo Alto Historical Museum, visit <http://blip.tv/paha-heritage/roth-building-4030000>.



*“The Exam” by Victor Arnautoff, Roth Building, Palo Alto (from the Palo Alto History Museum).*

# A Sad Tale—Rufus Keeler, Palo Altan

THIS MONTH I WOULD LIKE TO REPORT ON AN EBAY PURCHASE recently added to the PAHA Archives. Board member Brian George monitors eBay listings in search of interesting, inexpensive items pertaining to Palo Alto and Stanford. When he finds a potential candidate, he often consults with me before making a bid. If successful, he donates the item or items to the Archives (thank you Brian). The items are usually photographs, post cards or other printed ephemera.



FROM THE  
DESK OF THE  
HISTORIAN  
Steve Staiger

Recently Brian won, a “1920 Palo Alto, Cal. Railroad train letters, cover, stamps, Registered markings lot.” The item was an envelope marked with the “Chicago & North Western Railway” and contained a 5 page letter written by Lina Austin of Chicago to Rufus W. Keeler of Palo Alto. Austin and Keeler appear to have been relatives, and the letter discusses the health, care, and finances of other relatives. A letter, apparently of not much significance, provides an introduction to the story of Palo

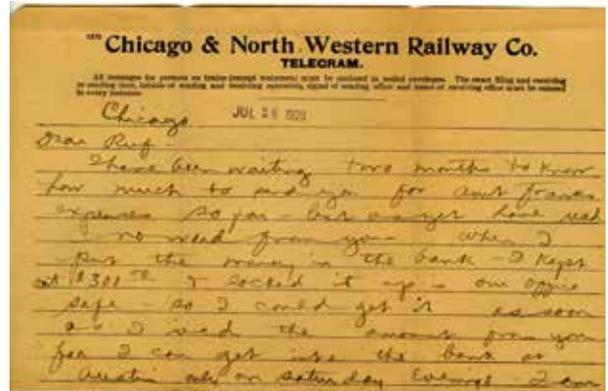
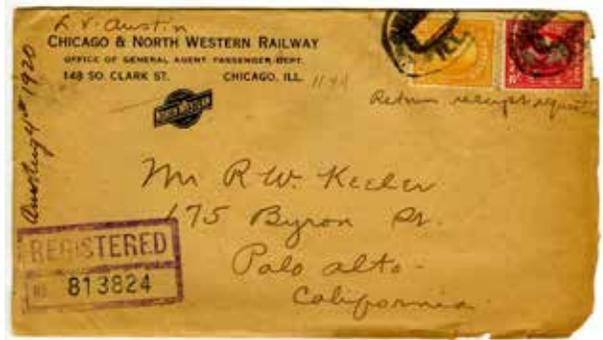
Altan, Rufus W. Keeler.

I researched Rufus W. Keeler and discovered an interesting story. According to his obituary, Keeler died in November 1939 at the age of 72. He had been a resident of Palo Alto for 31 years, living at 175 Byron Street (as the letter was addressed.) Prior to retiring, he had been the assistant electrical engineer at the Palo Alto power plant. He had come to California in 1880 and been involved in some of the earliest electrical installations in the Bay Area. Attached to the obit was a clipping from the San Francisco News, dated June 14, 1940, telling his sad tale.

Around 1910 Keeler married and brought his bride, and their wedding gifts of linen, china, and silver, to 175 Byron Street. Sadly, Mrs. Keeler died soon thereafter, though Rufus continued to live in there until his death in 1939. The 1940 clipping details the 15 truckloads of stuff removed from his house by town’s junkman. The wedding gifts were still in their unopened boxes, but there were also piles of rags and other worthless stuff throughout the house. Although Keeler owned two homes in Palo Alto, land in the Santa Cruz Mountains and in Yosemite Valley, he lived the for 30 years as a pauper at 175 Byron.

PAHA board member Kent Stormer lives in the house at 175 Byron Street today. He recalls that when he moved into the house in 1981 there was still evidence that a pack rat had lived there in the past.

A sad tale revealed to us today only through the acquisition of a letter written in Chicago in 1920, and bought on eBay in 2013.



Envelope and beginning of letter from Lina Austin to Rufus W. Keeler of Palo Alto, part of a collection of materials acquired for PAHA’s archives by Brian George.

## Mayfield Book Coming!

Research and writing have just begun on a new book about Mayfield that promises to give a fresh view of the original community that preceded Palo Alto. Historians, Doug Graham and Jeanne Farr McDonnell, welcome input on this project, including early maps, artifacts, deeds, memories, and other information. Descendants of Mayfield residents may have stories that would enrich their effort. Please contact Doug, 650-493-0689, or Jeanne, 650-321-5260, if you have information or artifacts that might contribute to this project.

**WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS**  
Diethild Price  
New Sponsoring Members  
Debbie and Michael Shepherd

**Oral Histories:** are an invaluable method to preserve local history. To volunteer, help record, or give an oral history, contact: Carol Mitchell at [carolmitchell@sbcglobal.net](mailto:carolmitchell@sbcglobal.net).

**IN MEMORIAM**  
Miriam Wehrend  
Sally McLeod

**Heritage Program on Channel 30**  
The March television feature will be “Music in Palo Alto: 1910-1930,” the Palo Alto Historical Association’s January 27 program, presented by Paul Price. The broadcast schedule is Wednesdays at 8:00 PM, Thursdays at 10:30 AM, and Saturdays at 1:00 PM.

*Our mission is to collect, preserve and make available to the public information about the history of Palo Alto.*

## History Jaunts

**Gamble Garden Spring Tour:** Friday and Saturday, April 26 & 27, 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM. The 28th Annual Gamble Garden Spring Tour invites Palo Altans and their friends to “Meander Down the Garden Paths” of six select gardens. For more information visit [www.gamblegarden.org](http://www.gamblegarden.org) or call (650-329-1336).

**Museum of American Heritage,** 351 Homer Ave., Palo Alto: “Fiber to Fabric: A History of American Textile Production.” The exhibit presents textile production, from Colonial times through mass-production in the Industrial Age. Historic artifacts illustrate the story of wool, linen and cotton from cultivation to finished product. The exhibit opened February 15 and will continue through August 18, 2013. For more information (650-321-1004) or [www.moah.org](http://www.moah.org).

**The Cantor Arts Center,** Lomita Drive and Museum Way, Stanford University Wednesdays–Sundays, 11:00 AM–5:00 PM; Thursdays 11:00 AM–8:00 PM. Take advantage of the permanent collections and plethora of events, activities, and lectures provided by this marvelous—and free—treasure. For more information, visit <http://museum.stanford.edu/calendar/>

**Don't Miss!** “Girl with the Pearl Earring: Dutch Paintings from the Mauritshuis” and “Rembrandt's Century.” This outstanding exhibit will remain at the de Young Museum, San Francisco, until June 2, 2013. Critics describe the exhibit as a “visual feast!” For more information, visit <http://deyoung.famsf.org>

As long as you're in the City, go to the Asian Art Museum, where “Fame. Infamy. Immortality” features China's terracotta warriors from the tomb of the First Emperor. The exhibit opened February 22 and will remain through May 27. For more information, visit [www.asianart.org/](http://www.asianart.org/).

## Become a Member of PAHA

We invite you to become a member of the Association and join those who care about Palo Alto and enjoy learning about its history. Your dues support the preservation of our archives, assistance to researchers and dissemination of Palo Alto historical information through our publications. Join today!

Individual \$25      Family \$40  
Sustaining \$60      Business/Sponsor \$100      Life \$350

Make check payable to PAHA and mail to: PAHA Box 193, Palo Alto, CA 94302. Or join online at [pahistory.org](http://pahistory.org). Let us know if you wish to volunteer for a PAHA committee. (Note: current members will receive renewal notices in July.)

## PAHA's Public Meetings

Meetings, free and open to the public, are held on Sundays at the Lucie Stern Community Center 1305 Middlefield Road.

The next meetings are:

MARCH 3

*Poisoned Again! Cover-up and Murder of Jane Lathrop Stanford*  
Speaker: John Morrow Hackmann

APRIL 7

*Historic Trees of Palo Alto*  
Speaker: John McClenahan

MAY 5

TBA

JUNE 5

PAHA Annual Dinner

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