

URBAN RENEWAL AND THE GOLDEN EAGLE SITE

by

Lynn Eisenman

Sonoma State University

Introduction

History of Sacramento Redevelopment

Golden Eagle Demolition

Conclusions

INTRODUCTION

Soon after the commencement of the archaeological field investigation of the Golden Eagle Hotel site in the summer of 1979, two problems became apparent. The first was the lack of adequate pre-field historical research that might have revealed more about the nature of the site in terms of the precise location of its architectural features, as well as expected associated features such as privies, trash pits, and cisterns. While limited historical data were gathered prior to commencing field work, extensive research into the documented history of the Golden Eagle was undertaken by contract separate from that of the archaeological study and was not initiated until well after the archaeological field investigation had been completed.

The second problem to emerge was the lack of adequate data detailing recent alterations of the archaeological record: What was the nature of post-depositional disturbance to the site, particularly during demolition of the hotel in 1963? Evidence for the fact that the site's integrity had been significantly altered during demolition came in two ways. Excavation of the hotel site resulted in a disappointing lack of intact features, such as privies and trash pits, in areas where historical documentation had suggested they would be located. In addition, visitors to the site who had been present during the hotel's demolition in 1963 recalled that the demolition contractor had been fond of historic relics; he was said to have used his backhoe in a highly sophisticated manner to excavate the same features that the archaeological crew was contracted to investigate, from which numerous bottles had been recovered (Fredrickson et al. 1979a:4). By the time archaeological field work was completed in August, there was no doubt that the Golden Eagle Hotel site, initially presumed to be in pristine condition, had in fact been significantly impacted during demolition. It was decided, therefore, that the demolition history of the Golden Eagle site building should be researched further in order to better understand the nature and degree of site disturbance.

The first step toward determining exactly what had taken place in 1963 was an attempt to contact those people who had either taken part in, or had witnessed, the demolition. This proved an impossible task, as those people who had visited the archaeological excavation and related their accounts of the event could not be relocated. The demolition contractor had long since departed Sacramento and could not be contacted.

The second step was to contact the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency in order to determine what pertinent information and documentation they had regarding the 1963 demolition project. Redevelopment Agency staff was extremely helpful and generously provided access to photographs, newspaper clippings, and demolition-contract files. They also provided pertinent information regarding the agency's early 1960s redevelopment policy, which had a significant effect on the fate of the Golden Eagle Hotel.

HISTORY OF SACRAMENTO REDEVELOPMENT

The story of the demolition of the Golden Eagle Hotel was shaped in part by the history of redevelopment in Sacramento, as executed by the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency, and more specifically by the concept of urban renewal. It is also the story of the interstate freeway system.

The Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency emerged as two agencies, the Sacramento City and County Housing Authorities, as a result of the Public Housing Program created by the U.S. Housing Act adopted by Congress in 1937. Shortly thereafter, the State of California enacted the Housing Authorities Law in compliance with the 1937 act. Subsequent legislation (Housing and Urban Development Act, 1965; Housing and Community Development Act, 1974), expanded the Housing Authorities' programs.

Legislation by the State of California in 1945 and by the federal government in 1949 necessitated the creation of a second local agency responsible for urban redevelopment. According to an agency report, the Redevelopment Agency of the City of Sacramento was chartered in 1950 for the purpose of "restoring, redeveloping or clearing blighted areas; improving public facilities; providing relocation assistance to decent, safe and sanitary housing for persons displaced by redevelopment activities; revitalizing downtown and neighborhood areas; and providing property rehabilitation loans and grants to eligible homeowners."

By 1973 the Sacramento City and County Housing Authorities and the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency had combined operation to unify the administration of urban renewal and public-housing programs in the City and County of Sacramento.

Redevelopment in Sacramento was initiated in September of 1956 with the first acquisition of property within a 65-block portion of the central business district of Sacramento. Once prime commercial land, the area had greatly deteriorated by the mid-1950s, as the following description from an agency report makes clear:

The area, bounded by the Sacramento River on the west and the State Capitol Building on the east, was abandoned to the forces of neglect and changed land use. It contained one of the worst skid rows west of Chicago. Run-down hotels, dance halls, pawn shops and bars made up much of the area. One 12-block area in particular had 167 bars and wine shops. Fights, stabbings, murders, prostitution and fires were daily occurrences.

Commerce wise, the strong relationship between river traffic, railroads, industry and business no longer existed. Yet, the old prefabricated houses shipped by boat from the East Coast in the 1850s remained. They were dilapidated, occupied potentially valuable land, denied public access to a beautiful river, and seriously impaired the important western approach to California's capital city.

Since the late 1920s, the commercial center of this colorful and historically rich city--largely a product of the gold rush days--had moved eastward away from the deteriorating core. While the public financial burden of serving the area was growing, tax revenue was decreasing each year.

Containing eight percent of the total city area and 7.5 percent of the population, the area had 26 percent of its fires, 36 percent of the juvenile delinquency, 42 percent of the adult crime, and 76 percent of the tuberculosis cases.

Sacramento's west end was clearly a problem area--a "blighted" area--and in need of drastic reform. Unfortunately, as suggested above, the west end also contained the remnants of Sacramento's historic beginnings: buildings dating from the mid-1800s paralleled the river, reflecting the city's historic role as a major port and center for commerce and trade joining the East Coast to the West.

It was at this primary stage of redevelopment in Sacramento that development of Interstate 80 became a major influence. Freeways throughout the country tend to follow established trade routes, particularly waterways and railroad passages, and the oldest sections of cities tend to grow out from these established routes of commerce. The cost of condemnation of lands is also least expensive in the oldest areas of the city.

Creation of Interstate 80 was to take much of the west end of Sacramento. Due, however, to the efforts of the Sacramento Historic Landmarks Commission, a body appointed by the City Council, a compromise was made (Sacramento Bee 2 June 1962). The freeway came to serve as an artificial boundary separating what was to become known as "Old Sacramento"--those rows of structures fronting the river to the west of the freeway, where historic buildings were rehabilitated--from the area east of the freeway and west of the capitol. This second area, within which the Golden Eagle Hotel was located, was deemed to be of lesser historical significance. Thus it continued to be viewed as "blighted" and was subsequently condemned, acquired, demolished, and finally cleared (Sacramento Bee 3 January 1963; Sacramento Union 2 April 1963).

Although the area east of the freeway was not considered to be historically significant, efforts were made to inventory and preserve historical materials located there for use in the restoration of the area west of the freeway designated as "Old Sacramento" (Sacramento Union 15 November 1962). Frank Christy of the Sacramento Historic Landmarks Commission headed the survey, which was primarily of architectural salvage. With the exception of the recovery of a bed, wardrobe, and dresser from a parlor bedroom that housed General U. S. Grant on his visit to Sacramento in 1879 (Sacramento Bee 5 June 1962; Sacramento Union 7 June 1962), all materials collected from the Golden Eagle Hotel were architectural features. The original doors of the Golden Eagle were located by Christy in the hotel basement behind a false wall (Sacramento Union 15 November 1962). Two marble fireplaces, one wood and tile fireplace, two marble washstands, and one wooden hand railing were also recovered (letter from Howard B. Leonard 23 August 1962).

GOLDEN EAGLE DEMOLITION

Early in 1963, the Redevelopment Agency issued an "Invitation for Bids for Redevelopment Project No. 3" for the purpose of demolition and site clearance. The Golden Eagle site was included in the invitation as "Item 10 (Block 237-Parcel 82). Principal Improvements: Three-story brick and wood frame located at 619-631 K Street. Floor area-56,028 square feet." The J. P. Smith Company of Sacramento was awarded the contract in April of 1963.

Investigation into the specifications for the Redevelopment Project No. 3 demolition and site-clearance contract revealed that the clearance of a property is a highly disruptive activity, involving a property's sub-surface, as well as its surface features. For example, Section 604 of the technical specifications regarding the treatment of excavated or exposed areas state that:

- a. The Contractor shall take all measures necessary to protect the Public from abandoned, cased or dug wells located on properties covered by this Demolition Contract.
- b. Dug wells shall be sufficiently backfilled and compacted so that backfill will not later settle and leave a dangerous hole. Cased wells shall have a steel plate welded over the top of the casing....
- e. Concrete and masonry foundations and basement walls shall be removed to existing ground or basement level and disposed of by the Contractor.

In describing demolition practices, a Redevelopment Agency staff member recalled that the J. P. Smith Company, in order to meet the above-mentioned technical specifications, used a backhoe to clear features such as wells and privies before backfilling and stabilizing them. This technique also allowed for the collection of bottles and other artifacts located within the features.

A second specification of the demolition contract concerned the removal and salvage of existing buildings. It stated that the Redevelopment Agency vested all right, title, and interest in and to buildings, structures, and other property to be demolished and/or removed by the contractor, with the exception of title to the land or premises and personal property of the occupants of the demolition-site's buildings. The contract price for performance of demolition and site clearance was established, based upon the contractor's estimated project cost less the estimated value of salvaged materials specified to become the property of the contractor.

The demolition contractor's right to salvage materials from the demolition site, coupled with the absence of laws protecting subsurface cultural resources, resulted in a situation in which any artifacts encountered were bound to be recovered by the contractor. This situation was not unusual in Sacramento: an article entitled "Collectors Follow West End Pit Shovels" (Sacramento Union 2 May 1963) described the col-

lection of historical artifacts by both construction workers and private individuals during excavation for the 5th Street underpass. In the article, an engineer for the project described the bottles that he had collected during excavation and stated that one, in particular, was worth \$18,00 to collectors. He also stated that nearly 100 people visited the construction site during one weekend to collect bottles. "There may not be pots of gold down here," he said, "but we'll all get rich if this bottle business keeps up."

CONCLUSIONS

The results of research into the nature of the demolition process at the Golden Eagle Hotel site clearly demonstrate the importance of this type of study prior to initiating subsurface investigations in urban redevelopment areas. Documentary and oral history research on the post-depositional history of urban sites can establish general parameters of integrity and indicate areas of potential before much more labor-intensive and costly field work is undertaken. It is especially important to pursue oral history from those most responsible for impacting urban historical sites, especially from bottle hunters and other relic collectors. Such research is not always easily conducted, as it requires an attitude of cooperation and mutual respect between bottle collectors and archaeologists. The information provided by collectors can, however, be extremely valuable to an accurate assessment of post-depositional disturbance and site integrity, and should be sought before sites are selected for test excavation.

Archaeological investigation of the Golden Eagle was undertaken in 1979 as a result of contemporary views of historical significance and compliance with state and federal law--views and laws which were a radical departure from that which existed in 1963, when the Golden Eagle was demolished.

