The Richmond District stretches from Arguello Boulevard to the ocean between the Presidio to the north and Golden Gate Park to the south. This special feature will focus on the area between Arguello (originally First Avenue) and Funston Avenue (originally Thirteenth Avenue), the oldest part of the district.

Although the Richmond was first settled over a century ago, it was not until the 1890s that any significant large-scale development occurred. By World War I it was a distinct neighborhood, almost entirely built up with an excellent transportation network. The development of the Richmond followed the Western Addition by about two decades, and the Haight area south of the Panhandle by about ten years. While large portions of the Richmond remain intact, a great deal of demolition has occurred.

This area, like most of western San Francisco, consisted of sand dunes until the late nineteenth century. Over thousands of years these dunes were created by sand blown from Ocean Beach by the prevailing westerly winds. There was virtually no vegetation and little water, except for Mountain Lake on the southern edge of the Presidio, and subsurface wells scattered amid the hills and dunes. The area, with the Sunset and the future site of Golden Gate Park, could be considered San Francisco’s Sahara—wind-blown, arid and almost entirely uninhabited.

Until approximately 1870, this land was divided into large and irregular blocks reflecting the homestead ownership pattern of much of the City’s “Outside Lands.” Traces of this first haphazard subdivision still exist in minor irregularities in some property lines. The land could not be further developed until transportation was provided. The first transit line, established in 1863 from Portsmouth Plaza to the Cliff House, ran along a former rabbit hunter’s trail renamed Point Lobos Road, now Geary Boulevard. Erratic and unpredictable, it contributed little to the development of the area.

The earliest known real estate advertisement for the Richmond was listed in the newspaper in 1871, although it was not until 1877 that plans were initiated by local landowners to construct a transit line from Market Street to the newly established Golden Gate Park and Ocean Beach beyond. The first real estate auction immediately followed in 1878 when J.J. O’Brien, an early settler, auctioned the block bounded by Point Lobos Road (now Geary Boulevard), A Street (now Anza), and Seventh and Eighth Avenues.

The inner Richmond also had to compete with other neighborhoods then being...
developed, particularly the Mission District (served by the Valencia Street Cable line), and the inner Haight (served by the Haight and Page Street lines). These areas were not only more conveniently served by cable car and other lines but also benefited by more temperate climates. Geography presented an additional obstacle in the form of Lone Mountain, located south of Geary and east of Arguello. Also retarding growth were the four cemeteries near Lone Mountain—Calvary, Laurel Hill, Odd Fellows and Masonic—and the city pound located near the terminus of the California Street line.

Beyond Lone Mountain, an Examiner article of 1889 noted “there were sand and lupin, lupin and sand, more sand and lupin, and nothing else until the cliffs overhanging the ocean.” In this waste land, identified as Seal Rock Rancho on the 1861 Official City Map and simply as the Outside Lands in 1879 (referring to the lands outside the City boundaries of the early 1850s), a few pioneers settled. The first of these was Charles Suane in 1865, who lived on Point Lobos Road between Seventh and Eighth, on the site of the future Richmond Congregational Church. He was joined by Dr. Isaac Rowell and John J. Kenney in 1867. The Kenney family was typical of the early Richmond settlers in being Irish and owning a little dairy farm at Fourth Avenue and Geary. John Kenney also worked as a contractor, building Lake Street from Arguello to Twenty-Sixth and grading the roadbed for the transit line on California Street.

The houses these settlers built were generally one-story cottages or farmhouses, sometimes in an Italianate style such as C.T. Harkins’ house at 1714 Anza Street. Others were more elaborate Queen Anne dwellings such as the George Turner Marsh residence at the southeast corner of Twelfth and Clement, and the Graham residence at the northwest corner of Eleventh and Geary. These buildings varied from the later residential development by being located on fifty-foot lots rather than the more common twenty-five-foot wide lots. Because of this, none of these early settlers’ houses has apparently survived, although some may have been moved and could exist undiscovered and undocumented.

The district in those days was described as follows by Angus MacKillop, one of the early pioneers:

“We then had really no street railroad service (except down Geary), no water and no gas. The road at night was as dark as the Black Hole of Calcutta, school facilities were primitive and inadequate and, in fact, we were as lacking in the benefits of civilization as if we were a settlement staked out in the plains.”

An early booster of the Richmond, and the person evidently responsible for naming it was George Marsh, the designer of the Japanese Tea Garden in nearby Golden Gate Park. His large Victorian house was called the Richmond House, after his birthplace, Richmond, Australia. (Another source states that the name of the district came from King Henry VII’s palace called Richmond.) Whatever the source, the Board of Supervisors officially recognized the name of the new district in 1890.

The chief booster of the Richmond was Adolph Sutro, owner of the Cliff House and much of western San Francisco. Called the Grand Old Man of the Richmond, he was responsible for grading and improving the Point Lobos Road (now Geary Boulevard), to increase the accessibility of the Cliff House and the “Outside Lands” of the Richmond, which lay between it and the Western Addition.

Residential development proceeded slowly, and the largely vacant area was used primarily for recreational purposes. The Bay District Race Track was located at what is now Arguello, Fulton, Fifth Avenue and Geary Boulevard. At its height in the early 1890s, it was said to attract crowds of 15,000, few of which were residents of the area. It closed in 1896, after the Ingleside Race Track opened. Another recreational facility was the “Chutes,” originally located in the Haight, but moved to Fulton between Tenth and Eleventh and opened May 1, 1902. (The Chutes moved a second time to Fillmore between Eddy and Turk in 1909.) The Richmond also hosted the twelfth and thirteenth Big Games between the University of California and Stanford University in 1902 and 1903 on the block bounded by California, Lake, Seventh and Eighth Avenues.

These recreational facilities, which re-

II

THE FOUNDATION FOR SAN FRANCISCO'S ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE
quired large areas of vacant and inexpensive land, were an interim land use between the platting of the area, which occurred in the 1870s, and its residential development, which began primarily in the 1890s.

The blocks in the Richmond differed from those in the older eastern part of the City in two important respects. They were oriented in a more truly north-south direction (thus the slight angle where California Street enters the Richmond at Arguello), and they were longer and more narrow. The standard size was 500 feet by 240 feet rather than the smaller and squarer 50-vara blocks downtown and in most of the Western Addition derived from the original Spanish and Mexican land surveys. Point Lobos (Geary) was the widest road at 125 feet, followed by California and the other east-west streets at 80 feet, and the north-south avenues at 70 feet across. The result of this particular platting was that residential development, when it occurred, was concentrated on the north-south avenues, and commerce on the east-west streets, particularly California, Clement, Geary and Fulton. The commercial streets were well-served by public transit, while the long north-south frontages tended to be less heavily traveled and thus more conducive to residences.

Residential development followed the usual pattern common to most San Francisco neighborhoods. The Point Lobos Improvement Association was formed in 1882, and the Richmond Neighborhood Improvement Club in 1885 (of which both Sutro and MacKillop were members). Their goal was to encourage city officials and private developers to construct the necessary infrastructure to support widespread residential development. To further the aims of the improvement clubs and publicize the area, a neighborhood newspaper, the Richmond Banner, began publication in 1893.

A turning point in the development of the district occurred when the Jackson Street line was completed from downtown and extended to Golden Gate Park via Fifth and Sixth Avenues. This not only brought pleasure-seekers from downtown and Pacific Heights to the Park, but also provided an attractive and convenient commute to residents of the Richmond. Once the three rail lines were established, the adjacent streets needed to be improved with paving, sidewalks and water mains. This was accomplished in what was then considered a somewhat novel manner. Property owners applied to the Street Committee of the Board of Supervisors for permission to grade the avenues at their own expense. The result was that "men and teams without number were immediately put to work. Hillocks were leveled, hollows filled in. Countless loads of gravel and broken rock were strewn along the streets selected for improvement, and the sandy sloughs disappeared for good" (Examiner, 11/3/1889). By 1890, graded streets included Clement from First (Arguello) to Twelfth, Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth, as well as A (Anza) Street. With this basic infrastructure in place, development proceeded apace until by the turn-of-the-century, a distinct and largely self-sufficient district had been created out of the earlier sand dunes.

Most of the nineteenth century buildings were located north of Geary Street, with commercial buildings on Clement between Second and Sixth and important rowhouse developments on the west side of Third Avenue between Cornwall and Clement. There is also a marvelous Queen Anne row on the west side of Sixth Avenue between Lake and California. While the Sixth Avenue row is still almost entirely intact, the earlier Third Avenue development has suffered some demolitions.

The major institution in the area was the French Hospital on the block bounded by Geary, Anza, Fifth and Sixth. Until the early 1890s, the French Hospital was located on Bryant Street between Fifth and Sixth (Chronicle, 9/20/1889). When that location became unsatisfactory due to the increased industrial development in the area, a more "salubrious" site was selected in the Richmond. A design competition was held and William Mooser and his French associate M.G. Morin-Goustiaux were selected as architects for the large hospital complex which included an administration building, wards, morgue, stables and engine house. The building, completed in 1894, was among the first large hospitals to be constructed according to modern methods based on Louis Pasteur's germ theory and the concept of isolation wards for different diseases (Chronicle, 12/22/1894). Only a small portion of the original building remains on the north side of Anza between Fifth and Sixth Avenues.

Other important local institutions included the Catholic Church of Mary Star of the Sea, the Episopal St. James' Guild Hall, a Methodist Episcopall Church at 351 Fourth Avenue, the Richmond Congregational Church at Clement and Seventh (later moved to the northwest corner of Seventh and Geary),
and the Maria Kip Orphanage at Seventh and Lake. The major industrial structure was the Park and Ocean Railroad Company’s Geary Street Car House built in 1892 and still extant at the northwest corner of Arguello and Geary. Cyclery shops and stables serving the visitors to Golden Gate Park were located on Fulton between Fifth and Eight Avenues. A small primary school was at 655 Sixth Avenue, the Sutro School at 250 Thirteenth Avenue and a post office was located at the northwest corner of Clement and Sixth.

The churches are particularly interesting both architecturally and historically. They were constructed as relatively small halls and later moved and enlarged as their congregations grew and the area developed. The Episcopal church, for example, originally worshipped in a store, then moved to a building on Clement near Sixth. Since this structure not only served as a church, school, social hall and meeting place but also was intended to be moved, it was, in the words of a contemporary account, “somewhat oddly constructed” (Chronicle, 10/20/1893). The altar and chancel were at one end and a stage at the other, so that the audience faced one way when worshipping and in the opposite direction when the building was used for entertainments. Other important early churches were the Gothic Revival Star of the Sea designed by Charles J. I. Devlin and dedicated February 26, 1888, and the Richmond Congregational Church dedicated on January 21, 1900.

With the exception of the grander residences such as Marsh’s, the first generation of houses in the Richmond were generally as modest and functional as the churches. Like them, they were usually one-and-a-half story wooden boxes with gable ends facing the street. An extremely simple and intact example of this type is located at 315 Second Avenue. Some of these pioneer houses had false fronts, such as the residence at 129-31 Second Avenue, which was evidently later moved, altered into two flats and a bay added. These houses were set back from the street and landscaped with a large backyard, often containing a shed or stable. The owners were generally working class—carpenters, grocers, laborers and clerks.

Beginning in the late 1880s, and early 1890s, rows of houses were constructed by owner-builders. Evidently the earliest and most extensive row of nineteenth century houses was constructed about 1893 on the west side of Third Avenue between Cornwall (originally South California Street) and Clement Streets. These were wood frame, one-and-a-half story with basement residences uniformly set back about ten feet from the sidewalk. A straight flight of stairs led to the recessed off-center entrance with an adjacent bay window occupying most of the facade. The gable end of the attic faced the street, contained a window, and was often decorated with fishscale or diamond-patterned shingles. Like most nineteenth century San Francisco residences, they had a “slot” or opening on one or both sides, which allowed light to reach the middle parlor or dining room.

After 1896, development intensified and spread to blocks previously unoccupied. This was due to the completion of the sewer outlet serving the Richmond. As a contemporary account noted, “As soon as the outlet in Point Lobos avenue was completed, Richmond was the scene of wonderful activity. It became the contractor’s paradise.” An example of this development activity occurred in 1896 when the firm of Warren & Malley graded the twenty-four blocks bounded by Geary, Fulton, Eighth and Fourteenth, and used the resulting sand to fill the recently closed Bay District Race Track a few blocks to the east. Another boon to the area occurred at the turn-of-the-century when Mayor Phelan announced the closing of the cemeteries to further burials. “The cemeteries,” he declared, “constitute a death line, cutting off the beautiful district of Richmond from the thickly settled portion of the City, and thus arrests our City’s growth” (Municipal Reports, 1899-1900, appendix, page 289). With the cemeteries closed to further burials, it was only a matter of time before they were removed from the neighborhood. This ultimately occurred in the late 1930s.

Development between 1900 and 1914 generally differed in style from the nineteenth century pattern, although there were several architects who continued
There might be inexpensive architecture.” He illustrated his argument condemning the picturesque Queen Anne houses with photographs of rows of them seemingly shipwrecked in the still largely sandy Richmond. The brunt of his criticism was focused on the Queen Anne row on Sixth Street mentioned earlier.

In response to this type of criticism, architects increasingly designed buildings in the more modern Edwardian and Craftsman styles. Deviation from the rigidity of the standard twenty-five-foot lot size also occurred, particularly on Tenth Avenue between Anza and Balboa. A greater emphasis was placed on landscaping as a way of softening the streetscape and imparting suburban ambiance to the area.

The typical development of this period
consisted of two-story and basement wood frame residences with often ornately decorated facades. The buildings tended to occupy the entire width of the lot. Even when constructed in rows, the facades of the buildings varied considerably. Particular attention was paid to the design and decoration of the roof, which often contained wide dormers, cornices and elaborate strutwork. Another common feature was a wide bay window on the facade. Excellent examples of this style can be found in the northern portions of the Richmond, particularly Eleventh Avenue between California and Lake. Idiosyncratic variations on this Edwardian Craftsman theme include the unusual paired bungalows with low gabled roofs and wide eaves at 1825-31 and 1925-31 Anza. Particularly important to the character of the area are the setbacks and landscaping, the use of a variety of exterior sheathing materials (shingles, stucco, clapboard, and face brick), and the varied roof treatments.

By the time the Municipal Railway line on Geary Street was opened in 1912, the Richmond was a largely completed neighborhood. In addition to the French Hospital, it contained several other important philanthropic institutions including the Maria Kip Orphanage at the northeast corner of Seventh and Lake (damaged in the earthquake and subsequently demolished), and the Home for the Aged of the Little Sisters of the Poor designed by Albert Pissis (300 Lake Street, demolished). Among the theaters were the Richmond (Sixth Avenue near Clement, later the Lincoln), the Fisher at 600 Clement Street, and the Palm at the northwest corner of Clement and Sixth. These were joined by the Coliseum at Ninth and Clement with a seating capacity of 2700.

The neighborhood also boasted three schools: Peabody at 250 Seventh Avenue, Frank McCoppin at 640 Seventh, and Sutro at 248 Thirteenth. This last summarizes much of the history of the Richmond. It was originally constructed as a one-story building at Point Lobos between Eighteenth and Nineteenth Avenues in 1879. The building was moved to Twelfth Avenue south of Clement in 1894 and its name changed from Point Lobos School to Sutro. The 1906 Earthquake heavily damaged the building, and a new school was constructed three years later on the same site but fronting on Funston. In the 1960s, it like the other two schools, was demolished.

Industries, all of which are now gone, included two lumber companies (on Geary at Fourth and Sixth), sheet metal works at Tenth and Clement, and the Point Lobos stables on Geary between Sixth and Seventh. In addition to the churches already mentioned, Saint John’s Presbyterian Church built a beautiful shingled building at Lake and Arguello, the Covenant Baptist Church was at 351 Fourth Avenue, the Evangelical Lutheran Zion Church was located at Ninth and Anza, and the Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church was at 407 Seventh Avenue.

While several elegant residences, flats and apartment buildings were constructed near the Presidio, the general
development of the Richmond after World War I followed the earlier pattern of rows of single family residences and flats. While the few remaining empty blocks were filled with residences, infill apartment buildings were also constructed on corner or vacant mid-block lots.

Fully developed by the Depression, with excellent streetcar service and commercial, recreational and public facilities, the Richmond was considered an ideal environment for young families. In fact, a San Francisco Bulletin article of 1924 wrote glowingly of the area as “a place of contented, uncrowded homes, and the birthplace and cradle of beautiful, strong children” (August 21, 1924). To reinforce this idyllic image, there was even an attempt to rename the area the Park-Presidio District thereby emphasizing the two great forested areas to the north and south.

While the population of the City as a whole declined after 1950 due to a general movement to the suburbs, the Richmond attracted increasing numbers of Asian settlers. To accommodate this influx, three- and four-story stucco apartment buildings were constructed in the 1960s and 1970s. These departed dramatically from the established historic character of the neighborhood in their scale, siting, material and design. Instead of being set back from the sidewalk, as was traditional, these apartment buildings occupied a much larger proportion of the lot. Most pre-World War II buildings had gabled roofs and decorated facades; those constructed after 1945 were characterized by flat roofs and barren facades. While apartment buildings constructed before World War II were located almost exclusively on corner lots, the apartment buildings of the 1950s and 1960s were scattered throughout the area and made no distinction between corner and mid-block sites.

By 1980, few blocks of the Richmond had escaped demolition and inappropriate new construction. Some streets, particularly Arguello, had been almost entirely redeveloped. Since older buildings tended to be more vulnerable due to their small size and single family residence use, many of the Richmond’s nineteenth century buildings were lost to new construction.

Since 1980, this trend has accelerated, with a total of 264 housing units demolished in the Richmond between 1980 and 1986 (San Francisco Examiner, May 31, 1987). This extensive redevelopment has led neighborhood groups, particularly the Planning Association of the Richmond (PAR) and Save Our Richmond Environment (SORE), to become increasingly concerned about the preservation of the character of their neighborhood. The Richmond is now at a critical point in its development. Heritage is working with the Department of City Planning and the neighborhood groups to assure that the historic and architectural character of the district is preserved and that new development is appropriate to that character.
IMPORTANT ROWS IN THE INNER RICHMOND

Beginning as early as 1885, row house development characterized large parts of the Richmond. The earliest rows, such as those on the east side of Second Avenue just north and south of Clement Street, consisted of three or four dwellings with identical plans but slight variations in the facade decoration. By 1900, longer rows had been constructed, notably on the west side of Third Avenue between Cornwall and Clement, and the extensive and varied Queen Anne row on the west side of Sixth Avenue between Lake and California designed by Marcuse and Remmels between 1898 and 1900. Rows of significant and largely intact early twentieth century two-story flats are located on the south side of California between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, and the west side of Seventh between Lake and California. Although these flats share a common plan and building form, facades and roofs are varied to provide individuality and interest to the streetscape. An article in the California Architect and Building News of March 1891 noted that the earlier practice of designing all buildings identically resulted in “confusion and trouble to the dwellers therein.”

The two most important builders of the Inner Richmond were Fernando Nelson and Joseph A. Leonard. Leonard was a prominent East Bay architect who developed many Queen Anne tracts in Alameda beginning in the 1880s. Like several owner-builders, he offered complete architectural and construction services, in addition to buying and developing his own rows. His work in the Richmond is characteristic of the Craftsman era.

Fernando Nelson was one of San Francisco’s most important developers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Over a long career, he built approximately four thousand houses, mainly in Noe Valley, the Inner Mission, Mint Hill, Duboce Triangle and Eureka Valley, where he lived at 701 Castro Street. By the early twentieth century he had begun work in the Richmond and established his office at 30 Cabrillo Street and his residence at 684 Second Avenue. Nelson tended to rely on certain tried-and-true plans and elevations, which varied relatively little over the decades he practiced. Like other builders, Nelson incorporated certain unique decorative elements into his designs, including rows of joined circles called “buttons,” long thin millwork on columns called “drips,” and quarter-sunbursts on the arched entrances.

The extensive rows designed by Nelson, Leonard and others are an important component of the Richmond environment. Since they were built somewhat later than similar development in the Mission and Western Addition, most of them remain relatively intact and unaltered. Because they contribute so much to the character of the Richmond, these rows deserve special attention and protection.

Joseph A. Leonard Rows:

Ninth Avenue, west side between Anza and Balboa, 1910-11.

Tenth Avenue, east side between Anza and Balboa, 1911.

Tenth Avenue, west side between Anza and Balboa, 1911.

Eleventh Avenue, west side between Anza and Balboa, 1910.

Anza Street, south side between Eighth and Ninth, 1909.

Balboa Street, north side between Eighth and Ninth, 1909.

Cabrillo Street, south side between Ninth and Eleventh, 1910.

Cabrillo Street, north side west of Tenth, 1910.

Fulton Street, north side between Ninth and Eleventh, 1910-11.

Tenth Avenue, east side between Cabrillo and Fulton, 1911-12.

Tenth Avenue, west side between Cabrillo and Fulton, 1911-13.

Eleventh Avenue, east side between Cabrillo and Fulton, 1910-13.

This special feature on the Inner Richmond was researched and written by Christopher H. Nelson, with assistance from Gary A. Goss and Ray Siemers. Contemporary photographs by Gary A. Goss.