

Exploring Eureka's historic neighborhoods

# Architectural LEGACY

by Kathy Dillon

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Originally known as Brett Street, this section of 15th Street was built up in the early 1900s. It remains one of Eureka's finest historical residential neighborhoods.



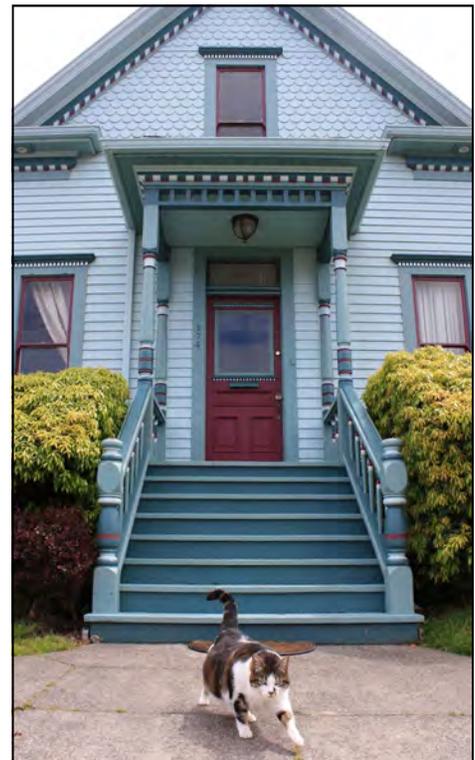
## THE BRETT STREET IDEA

Even with brisk traffic darting up and down 14th Street a block away, this neighborhood's serene domesticity remains undisturbed. Neighbors' greetings are easily called back and forth, and cats nap peacefully on refined porches built a century ago.

Originally called Brett Street, this well-tended section of 15th Street — from C to E streets and intersected by William and D — is one of Eureka's premiere old neighborhoods. In fact, according to the preservation experts who evaluated the city's architecture in the 1970s for the Eureka Heritage Society, it is eligible to be on the National Register of Historic Places as a district.

Most of the houses here were built between 1903 and 1917, a prosperous time. A railroad line had finally connected the remote North Coast to the urban south, and Eureka's population nearly doubled. A housing boom resulted, and this neighborhood became a choice locale, spurring a local newspaper to applaud it as "the Brett Street idea."

Serene early-1900s neighborhood has its roots in Eureka's pioneer days



A cat walks in front of her 1904 home at 274 15th St. It is the oldest house on the block.



**From 1911 to 2011: 100 years ago Brett Street was a dirt road with wooden sidewalks and water towers.**



By 1917, Brett Street was lined with an exceptional blend of stylish homes. While there are a few complementary houses with late-19th century elements, most reflect a pivotal change that was taking place in housing fashion: Victorian ostentation was phasing out as the more streamlined Colonial Revivals, Classical Revivals and Craftsman emerged across the nation.

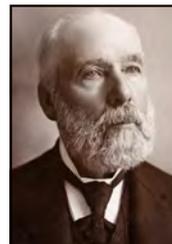
Most of the Brett Street houses were built for between \$1,500 and \$2,500 — within reach of the burgeoning middle class. It was a scenario happening all over town, including a block away on 14th Street, which was then known as Porter Street.

The two roads were named after Richard Brett and Robert Porter, the men who owned and platted the Brett and Porter Addition in the 1870s. The tract ranged from Porter to Wabash and C to F streets, and it appeared it would quickly build up. After all, these two early Humboldt pioneers knew how to get things done.

Porter was a native of Virginia, and in 1852 he traveled via the Oregon Trail to Eureka. While he spent several years managing the office for the Vance sawmill, he eventually acquired thou-



**R.W. Brett**



**R. Porter**

sands of acres of ranchland.

Brett was an Englishman from Dorchestershire who came to Eureka via Australia and San Francisco in 1850. His fortune started by supplying the isolated frontier town with an obvious draw. He opened

a saloon that boasted “two splendid billiard tables ... and the most enticing liquors and cigars.” Entertainment was also on the bill, including an appearance by “little Lotta Crabtree,” protégé of notorious Spanish-style dancer and courtesan Lola Montez.

In his 1929 book “The Humboldt Bay Region: 1850-1875,” Owen Coy wrote that “Brett’s saloon was important as a center of social and political life for a large portion of the men.”

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For Brett, it was a starting point, and he soon became involved in the community in many ways. In 1855 he reached out to the straight-laced set by allowing the Sons of Temperance Ball to be held in his saloon.

In 1856 the Humboldt Times reported Brett agreed to rent rooms in his establishment for a county courtroom, two jury rooms and sheriff's offices, with the stipulation he could use the space when the county did not need it. The saloon soon gained the nickname "Brett's Court." In 1865, he let the Ladies Social Circle of Eureka use it to auction their handmade U.S. Banner Quilt as a benefit to aid sick and wounded Union soldiers.

A dedicated Mason, Brett was also a hard-working member of Humboldt Lodge 79, serving as its grand master in 1865. The following year, he served a term as president of Eureka's governing board of trustees.

All the while, Brett was investing in real estate. This included 36 acres of land south of town that he bought in partnership with Porter for \$1,000 in 1866; it would become the Brett and Porter Addition. By the mid-1870s, the town had grown and prospered enough for the partners to begin dividing the land for imminent sale and development.

Fate intervened.

"We regret being called upon to announce the dangerous illness of Mr. R.W. Brett," the West Coast Signal reported on Dec. 20, 1877. "His disease is typhoid fever, and he is believed to be beyond the reach of medical aid."

Typhoid was a grim reality before advances in public sanitation that came in the 20th century. A common worldwide illness transmitted by the ingestion of contaminated food or water, it penetrated all levels of society. While it



**The nearby Mercer and Porter houses (above); another early view of**

never reached epidemic proportions in Humboldt County, the dreaded disease killed 88 people from 1875 and 1923. Brett succumbed on Dec. 22, 1877. He was 58.

Some may have held Brett's saloon success against him. Yet after his death, the Signal editorialized: "We shall remember him as the social, kindly, even-tempered citizen who did vastly more to ameliorate the condition of his fellow men ... than many who claim to walk in the narrow path of strict rectitude."

Most, it seems, agreed. At the funeral, it was reported "a great assemblage of citizens ... followed the remains to their earthy resting place at Myrtle Grove [Cemetery]."

With Brett's death, a series of probate, estate and resale issues delayed the development of most of the addition for the next 25 years. Among the exceptions was the construction of the 1895 towered Queen Anne home of wealthy building contractor H. Mercer at Porter and D streets.

In 1892, Porter had his own grand home built on the tract's highest point at Wabash and E, where he lived until his death in 1906. By the 1950s, the house had become dilapidated and was demolished.

In the mid-1960s the city changed the Porter and Brett street titles to numbers. The two men became obscure historical footnotes, their names an old curiosity engraved into a few curbs along 14th and 15th streets.

Many of the houses in their addition are now



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Described as “a superb piece of architectural sculpture” in the Eureka Heritage Society’s survey files, the 105-year-old home of Leonard and Diane May seems to reign with glowing serenity as the star along this remarkable stretch of historical 15th Street.

With its large columns, cantilevered corner bays, a multitude of curved brackets and finely detailed original windows, the house is a Colonial Revival beauty with a dash of Craftsman flair. It looks, the survey files add, as if it were built for an affluent man.

So it was: Frank Brown, owner of a fashionable ladies furnishings and millinery shop in downtown Eureka. Brown and his wife Lenno were the first of a handful of homeowners who have carefully tended the house over a century’s time. Among them were Dr. William and Norma Quinn, who moved in for a 42-year stay in 1913.

— Continued on Page 6



Prosperous times set the scene for enduring 1906 family home

# Domestic tranquility



## INGLENOOK: Symbol of the medieval hearth

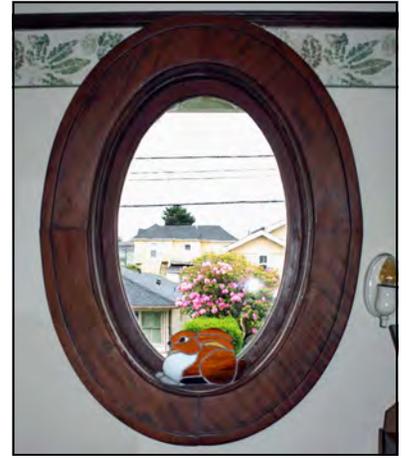
The home’s parlor is accented by an inglenook, a large recessed opening that contains the fireplace. Inglenooks originated in the Middle Ages when open fires burned without chimneys in the center of large, medieval halls. Smoke was ventilated through unglazed windows, and a better way was needed, according to Stephen Hall of “This Old House” TV.

In the 12th century, interior fires began to be moved to perimeter walls and were enclosed with a hood and side walls.

Benches were added on each side for the cooks. As fireplaces gradually became more efficient, the inglenook was reduced to the decorative columns and pilasters of a mantelpiece.

Inglenooks re-emerged in the late 1800s as fashionable additions to grand Shingle-style houses on the East Coast. Locally, these ancient symbols of security and warmth can occasionally be found in larger Colonial Revival and Craftsman homes.





Framed with spring flora, the May home on 15th Street is a Colonial Revival with Craftsman flair. In the Eureka Heritage Society survey files, the exterior is described as “a very sophisticated interplay of void and solid.”



The original windows include a bull's-eye and diamond-pane shapes in the master bedroom. While all of the home's interior woodwork had been painted before the Mays moved in, Leonard May has restored the finish in this bedroom.

**From Page 4**

The Quinns raised their daughter and son, Phyllis and Robert, in the house. Decades later, Robert — by then a physician himself — recalled a special memory from his boyhood days on Brett Street: the summertime iceman, Amos Christie, known as "Eureka's Red Grange."

"He was somewhat of a hero because ... he was a college football player," Quinn wrote in the Humboldt Historian (Sept.-Oct. 1982). "He played for the University of Washington and on teams which went to the Rose Bowl twice."

The Quinns' tenure in the house ended in 1955, and it had two succeeding owners before the May family moved in some 32 years ago.

"We all just fell in love with it at first sight," Diane May said. While the house was in great shape, the Mays have done work



The Mays have brightened a dark kitchen with paint and lined the stairway with family photographs and mementos.

over the years, including lots of painting inside and out, the construction of a complementary, one-story addition onto the back of the house, cross-bracing to shore up the foundation, and post-earthquake tasks ranging from crack repairs to the reconstruction of the parlor's fireplace.

"We've always tried to maintain the integrity of the house," Leonard said. "We've stayed as close to the original as we could."



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## Dentil work

Dentils are decorative elements seen on many late-19th and early-20th century buildings. A dentil molding is a series of small, square wood blocks — looking like teeth — found on cornices and above windows, as is the case at 274 and 254 15th St.



In 1920, Eureka had many more grand homes than it does today. Yet that was the year the Humboldt Standard applauded “the Brett Street idea” — the avenue that was filled with modestly sized houses possessing great charm.

It was a mindset the Standard lauded as well: “The people of that section have developed a community spirit and take pride in the appearance of their homes [which are] so universally well-groomed as to make that particular section ... one of the favored spots of Eureka.”

Several of these “Brettsters” were immigrants, like Nels and Elizabeth Olsen, the first owners of the 1909 Craftsman with a striking front gable at 226 Brett St.

Elizabeth’s parents landed in Eureka in 1851 from Ireland. Nels, who became part owner of the Humboldt Laundry, was a Norwegian who arrived in 1886. He was among the city’s thriving Scandinavian community, which by 1900 included more than 1,500 from Denmark, Finland, Norway, Holland and Sweden.

The oldest house on the block, 274 15th St., was built by 1904, and it reflects a variety of Victorian-era architectural styles, including Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Italianate and Eastlake. This blending of styles was a

way for builders and homeowners to express individuality.

From 1910 to 1922, it was home to three successive families of the Falk clan, originally from Pennsylvania, including Elijah and Amelia Falk. While the extended family is remembered as lumber entrepreneurs, Elijah earned his place in the history books for going against the grain. In 1915, he was elected Eureka’s only socialist mayor by a margin of three votes.

The house is now the home of Jim Putonio and Jenny Pschaida and their two sons. The family moved in five years ago.

“I love it because of its age,” said Jim, a Massachusetts native. The house, like most of Eureka, he added, reminds him of small New England coastal towns rich with history.

The house also offers a sunny backyard and a second-story view of the ocean. The couple, however, did move in with the knowledge a lot of work was needed. Jim, a building contractor, has been at it in his spare time ever since.

First came the rebuilding of an impossibly narrow, steep staircase and the construction of a second-story balustrade around the new stairs.

On the exterior, missing dentils were replaced and a new five-color painted scheme shows off elegant Victorian ornamentation. The work continues.



**Built in 1909, 226 15th St. has a strikingly unusual front gable.**

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Beginning in the mid-20th century, many of Eureka's historic homes began to fall victim to awkward modernization efforts. This stretch of 15th Street has largely escaped that fate.

"No, it hasn't changed that much," says Josephine Minton, who moved into 1523 William St. with her family in 1939 when she was 9 years old.

Josephine's father was born in Denmark and came to the States as a youngster. In Eureka, he was the captain of two Coast Guard vessels. His children's life revolved around Brett Street.

"The sidewalks were still made of wood," Josephine recalled. "It was colder then, and it would get frosty and all us kids would try to slide on the ice with our bikes."

Josephine married in 1951, and a ranch-style house was built for the newlyweds across the street at 15th and William. She and her second husband, Biar, live there to this day.

Josephine always kept in touch with her old neighborhood friends, and she readily remembers the various family names from back then, like Ru-Flo Harper Lee, daughter of North Coast automobile pioneer Harvey Harper Sr. She lived across the street at 241 15th St., a Colonial Revival-Craftsman blend with endearing formality.

The house was constructed in 1911 by Dennis Simpson, who is remembered as the building foreman of the Simpson-Vance Mansion and superintendent of construction for the old Eureka City Hall and the Carnegie Library.

Likely built as a single-family rental home, it was turned into two apartments by the 1920s and served for a time as the home for Simpson's two daughters.

In 2005, local high school teacher Marianne Lancaster bought the house and quickly updated its plumbing and electrical systems. She has an aesthetic to-do list, she added, that will retain the home's historical integrity.

Marianne loved the house from first sight. "It just looked like home," she said. "And it's a lovely, quiet neighborhood."

The neighbors are part of the scenario.

"People aren't too nosy, but we do several things a year together," she said. "We've been to each other's houses for dinner, there's Christmas caroling ... Everybody counts on each other for the important reasons."

The Brett Street idea continues to thrive.



The Colonial Revival/Craftsman at 241 15th St. includes original wainscoting and a cross-beam ceiling in the dining room.



**Research by Bob Libershal contributed to this issue.**

R.W. Brett portrait courtesy of Humboldt Mason Lodge No. 79.  
All other historical photographs courtesy of the Humboldt County Historical Society.

**Architectural Legacy is available online at [eurekaheritage.org](http://eurekaheritage.org).**

For more information e-mail: [kdillon72@att.net](mailto:kdillon72@att.net).

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