

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
WEST PORTAL

WEST PORTAL
REFERENCE

Boost for Twin Peaks Tunnel
and GREATER SAN FRANCISCO



Support the Improvement Clubs and Civic Organizations

Printer: Press - 1000 1/2 St. - 451 Bush St.

PREFACE

Before the Twin Peaks Tunnel opened in 1917, the land west of the hilltops in San Francisco was virtually inaccessible from downtown, making the primary activity in the area dairy grazing and vegetable farming.

With streetcar service, the open acreage provided a unique opportunity for putting the "City Beautiful" ideas of the early 20th century into action. Around West Portal Avenue came St. Francis Wood, Balboa Terrace, and Forest Hill: urban developments with park-like designs and prohibitions against any uses beyond residential and recreational.

West Portal Avenue acted as the commercial strip serving these communities. This separation of commercial and residential districts later became commonplace in the Bay Area with the advent of true suburbs after World War II.

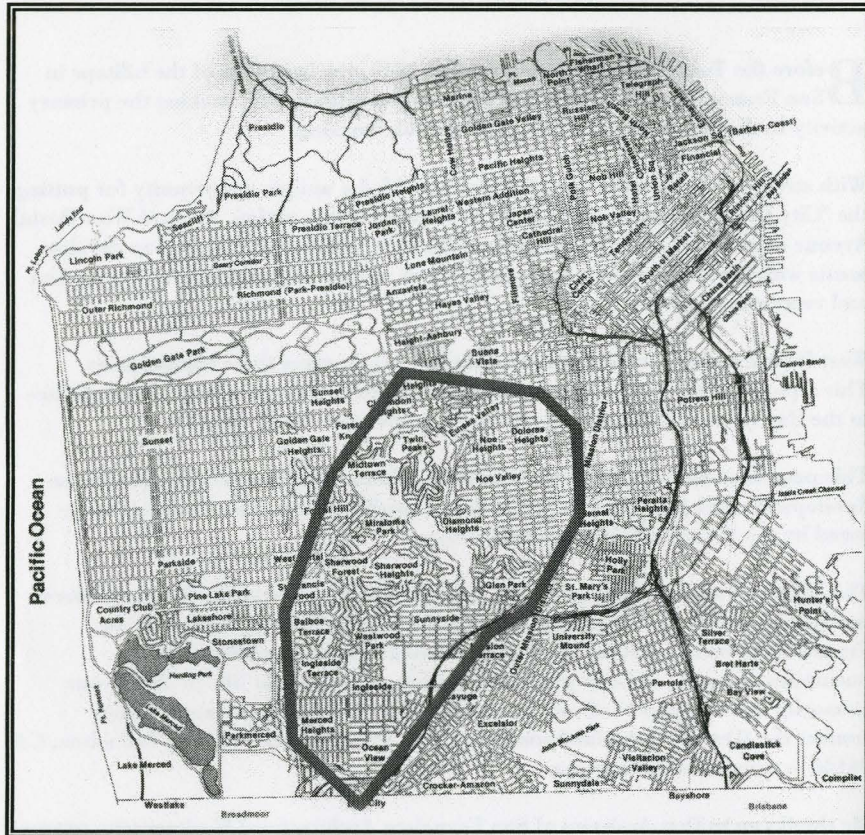
This pamphlet contains a series of historical photos with interpretive text on the development and growth of the West Portal neighborhood. The work was sponsored by the Western Neighborhoods Project.

The Western Neighborhoods Project, a nonprofit organization formed to preserve and document the history and culture of the neighborhoods in western San Francisco, records personal memories, photographs, and stories of local businesses, schools, clubs or places of worship. If you would like to share your memories and old photos of any part of the West of Twin Peaks area, please contact the Western Neighborhoods Project at P.O. Box 460936, San Francisco, CA 94146 or www.outsidelands.org.

My thanks go to Don Andreini of San Francisco Architectural Heritage who put me in touch with Woody LaBounty of the Western Neighborhoods Project. Bill Beutner of Heritage shared his knowledge of Fernando Nelson, the primary builder of West Portal. Susan Goldstein of the San Francisco History Center of the San Francisco Public Library granted permission to use their photos as did Greg Gaar. The California Historical Society furnished the poster shown on the cover. Mae Silver, whose book on Rancho San Miguel is now in its second edition, graciously acted as our consulting historian. Alan Davenport Design Associates kindly donated the design services for the pamphlet.

Richard Brandi
San Francisco
November 2001

WEST PORTAL

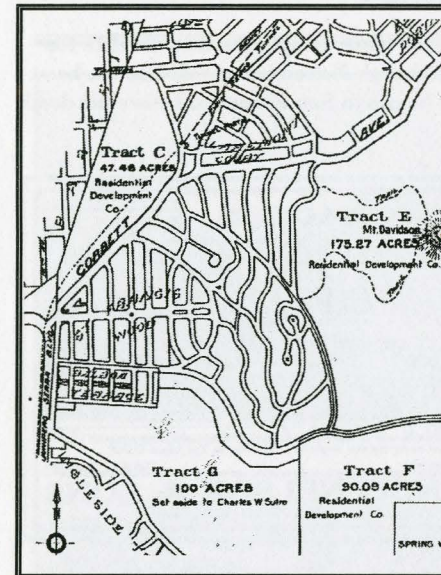


Boundaries of Rancho San Miguel—Mae Silver

The area now called West Portal was part of Rancho San Miguel, a huge Mexican land grant awarded to Jose de Jesus Noe in 1846. The area, covered with sand and scrub, was difficult to reach. Except for the Ingleside race track and the Alms House for the Poor (Laguna Honda Hospital), the main activity was dairy grazing and vegetable farming.¹

In 1880 Adolph Sutro bought part of Rancho San Miguel and willed that 1,200 acres —land that now runs from Forest Hill to Westwood including West Portal—be placed in a trust for charitable and educational purposes.²

After Sutro's death in 1898, his heirs succeeded in breaking the trust. A.S. Baldwin, Joseph Leonard, J.E. Green and Duncan McDuffie bought most of the land and developed a number of residential tracts: St. Francis Wood and Forest Hill (1912), Ingleside Terraces (1913), Miraloma (1914), and Westwood Park (1916)



New residential tracts, circa 1914.
West Portal is Tract C.
—Mae Silver

Architects and developers used many of the "City Beautiful" ideas of the early 20th century in designing the tracts. Called "residential parks" these tracts featured lush landscaping with architectural embellishments such as columns, gateways, decorative urns and stairways. Structures other than single family homes, such as commercial buildings, apartments, stables or saloons, were prohibited. Streets followed the natural contour of the land in gentle, sweeping curves instead of running straight up and down hills as was typical in other parts of the city.



Claremont Court looking west from Portola Drive (then called Corbett Road), 1916. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

The result was beautiful but sales were slow without convenient streetcar service to downtown where many people worked. As early as 1912, civic groups had agitated for a tunnel under Twin Peaks to connect the area with the rest of the city. In 1917, Chief Engineer O'Shaughnessy finally built one, the world's longest streetcar tunnel. "Once the tunnel was completed, properties sold more readily for the tracts were among the best planned in San Francisco."⁴

The West Portal tract was the last section to be developed. Consisting of 49 acres (tract "C" on previous map) near the Twin Peaks tunnel entrance, it was used to stage construction equipment for the tunnel and was held in reserve for a streetcar right-of-way to the Parkside (L line) and out to Sloat Boulevard (K and M Lines).⁵

¹ Jean Kortum, "San Francisco's San Miguel Rancho," *Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 14, No.1, page 27.

² Mae Silver, *Rancho San Miguel*, Ord Street Press, 1992, page 43.

⁴ Mel Scott, *The San Francisco Bay Area, A Metropolis in Perspective*, University of California Press, 1959, page 167.

⁵ *San Francisco Examiner*, June 4, 1916, page 1E.

After those needs were discharged, Fernando Nelson bought the tract in 1916 for \$300,000 and called it West Portal Park. Although Nelson is not well known, he was a prolific builder and completed 4,000 homes in San Francisco before his death in 1953 at the age of 93.⁶

Nelson advertisement
October 14, 1916

Wide Residence Lots
\$35 per ft. and up

500 LOTS IN

Business Lots in direct line with
Market St. \$70 per ft. and up

CLAREMONT COURT
WEST PORTAL PARK

With City-Accepted Streets Ready for Building NOW, and
IN PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT

RIGHT AT THE WEST PORTAL OF TWIN PEAKS TUNNEL—Situated in a sheltered valley at its elevation of 349 feet. Surrounded by
scenic residential tracts; which guarantee protection in every direction. 12 minutes from Civic Center via "Honesty" car. 15 minutes from
Marina. 20 minutes from Golden Gate Park. 25 minutes from the city. It is actually a country 10 minutes by 7 mi. drive or private auto. —Center in within three minutes of
all city thoroughfares. No dilapidated or old buildings within sight of any lot. Everything new and modern.

DURING 46 YEARS' EXPERIENCE IN BUILDING AND SELLING WE HAVE BUILT UP AN ORGANIZATION THAT PRODUCE RESULTS AS SHOWN IN:

PARKWAY TERRACE 28TH AVE. and LINCOLN WAY
where 50 homes at wide lots are under construction and have been
sold within the past year at prices ranging from \$5500 to \$8000.

PARK WOOD HEIGHTS FIRST AVE. and
where 40 homes have been built and sold in the vicinity of
completion at prices ranging from \$5500 to \$7000.

Before buying elsewhere make a careful comparison with these FOUR Respected Residential
Tracts on which we are operating at-on-time, and selling on Very Liberal TERMS

Main Office: 28th and Lincoln Way

Telephone Sunset 603

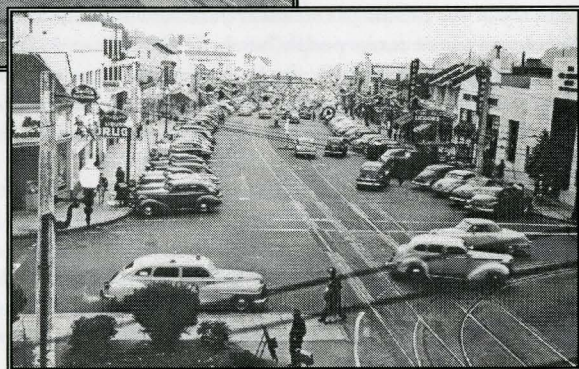
FERNANDO NELSON & SONS

The Largest Home Builders on the Pacific Coast

Nelson built and sold homes in West Portal Park, and allowed businesses and services to take root on West Portal Avenue. The strip has served for 80 years as the primary commercial artery for St. Francis Wood, Forest Hill and other residential parks.



West Portal, 1929
—Greg Gaar



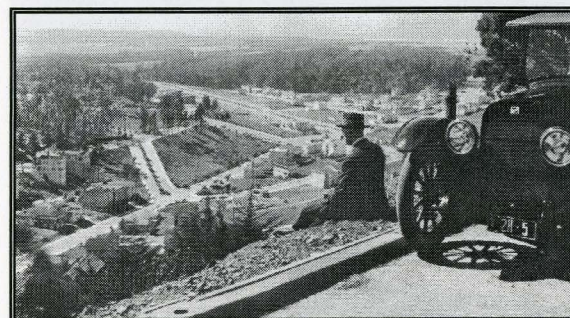
West Portal, 1947
—Greg Gaar

PHOTO SERIES



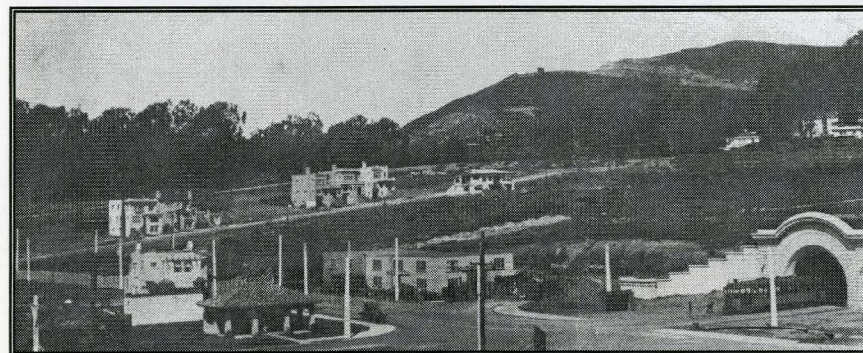
San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

Looking south over what appears to be streetcar rails near present day West Portal Avenue in 1917. During the tunnel's excavation, one half of the tailings from the tunnel were used to fill in low-lying areas in West Portal.⁷



—Greg Gaar

Claremont Court looking south from Edgell, 1920. This photo shows how the development of West Portal's planned communities differed from the rest of San Francisco: exclusively residential, curving streets and landscaping (with some trees taken from the 1915 Pan Pacific Exhibition). The first house built in West Portal was for Dr. Strubes at a cost of \$14,000.⁸



San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

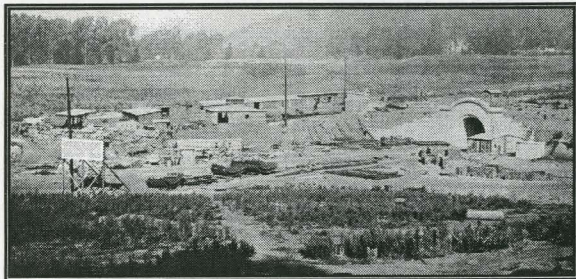
Intersection of West Portal Avenue and Ulloa in 1920. Fernando Nelson's sales office can be seen on the corner of West Portal and Ulloa (present site of Walgreens). His warehouse is located where the West Portal Library now stands. He built the homes at 420, 430, 440, 450, 460 and 470 West Portal and along Lenox Way.⁹

⁶ San Francisco Chronicle, November 22, 1953, page 34.

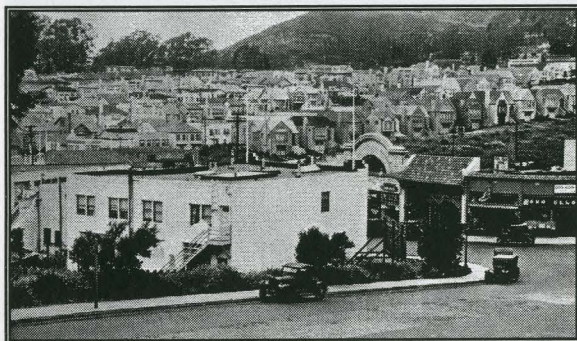
⁷ San Francisco Examiner, June 4, 1916, page E.

⁸ San Francisco Chronicle, October 14, 1916, page 13.

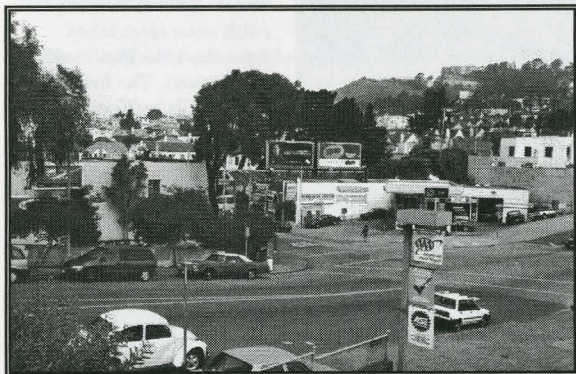
⁹ Conversation with staff of San Francisco Architectural Heritage, July 19, 2001.



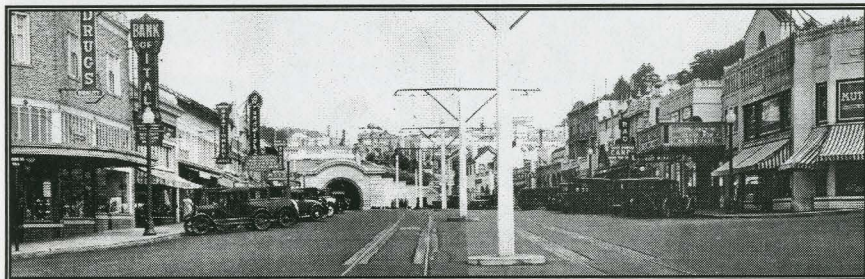
View of the tunnel from
Claremont Avenue, 1916
—Greg Gaar



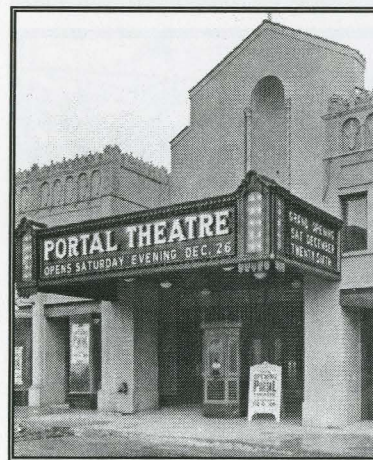
Same view, 1927
—Greg Gaar



View today, 2001
—Richard Brandi



West Portal Avenue looking
towards the tunnel, 1927.
—Greg Gaar



Portal Theatre, 1926—
San Francisco History Center,
San Francisco Public Library

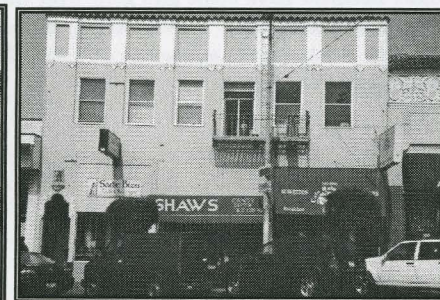


Empire Cinema, 2001
—Richard Brandi

Although no structures have been designated as architecturally significant on West Portal Avenue, the movie theater has been a fixture since 1926. It has undergone name changes, several face lifts and division into three theaters.



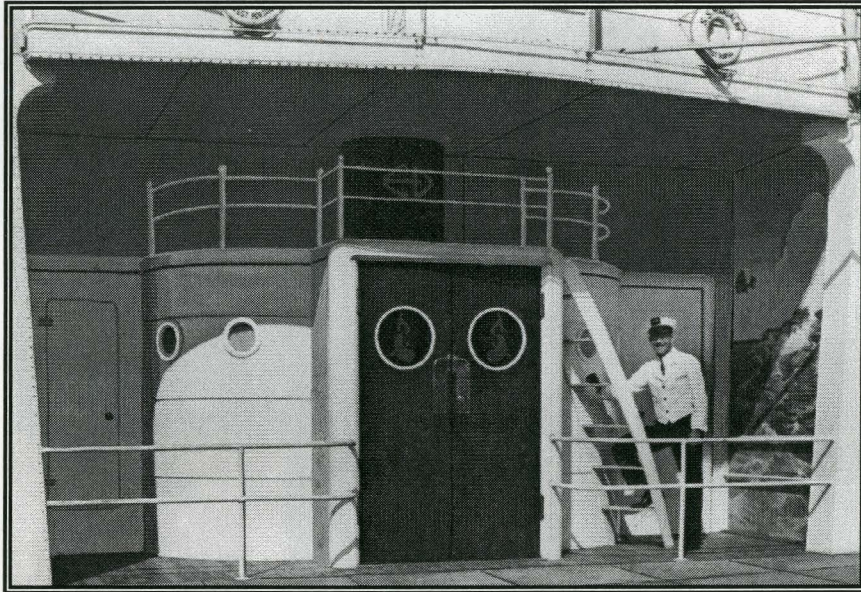
San Francisco History Center,
San Francisco Public Library, 1931



View today, 2001
—Richard Brandi

Shaw's Ice Cream has been here almost as long, since 1931. Shaw's began as a Karmel Corn under Douglas Shaw who developed a gourmet line of chocolates and ice cream. He made candy in the back of the West Portal store and expanded to a 50-store chain before going out of business. The remaining Shaw's, in West Portal, Millbrae and Yorba Linda, are independently-owned and operated.¹¹

¹¹ Shaw's San Francisco Web site, www.shawssanfrancisco.com.



*San Francisco History Center,
San Francisco Public Library*

Many business have come and gone over the years but bars have been a constant fixture, at least since Prohibition was repealed in 1933. The "Road to Mandalay" a bar with a ship motif, opened at 314 West Portal in 1941. It is now home to Barbagelata Realty.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Brandi is a West Portal resident and fourth-generation San Franciscan. His relatives owned a farm in Visitation Valley from 1883 until 1929. They sold their produce in Colombo Market, a wholesale exchange founded by Richard's great, great grandfather in 1874. It was razed in the 1960s to make way for the Golden Gateway complex near the Embarcadero. Today, all that remains is an ivy-covered brick arch on Front Street.

Richard conducts research, writing and photography for corporations and governmental organizations. He can be reached at: www.brandicommunications.com.