Charles Fletcher Stephenson was born 8 November 1857 in England and had immigrated to the United States in 1873. Charles married Emily in 1889 upon her arrival from England at age 20. The couple had five children by 1900: Walter James born in 1889; William born in 1891; Amy born 27 December 1894; Etta (Henrietta) born in 1896. Two additional children were born shortly thereafter: Charles in 1902; and Gladys in 1905. Charles F. Stephenson and his family resided on Lots 14 and 15 until 1943 when the residential portion was acquired by Caltrans for the planned East Shore Highway (Alameda County Official Records 4452:461, 5291:419–420).

Charles worked as a painting contractor throughout the time he lived on Clement Street. His brother Stanley and son Walter also worked in that profession for lengthy periods of time, evidence that the strong social ties among the family included working together. The second eldest son, William, was a clerk in the post office. The two eldest daughters married and continued to live in the county for much of their lives. Amy married Elmer Floyd Criger in 1915 and had two daughters, May born in 1916 and Elmira born in 1926. Gladys married Robert C. Scheile in 1920 and had two sons, Robert C., Junior born 1925 and Gordon Stanley born in 1929.

Charles F. Stephenson lived on his Clement street property until his death in late December 1942. His wife Emily preceded him in death in 1936 and the property passed to Walter.

Stephenson house circa 1920
Nearly Neighbors
The Stephenson Family
4425 & 4423 Clement Street (32 Clark Street)
Period of Residence: 1897-1943

Analysis and integration of the architectural, historical and archaeological evidence associated with Charles F. Stephenson has given archaeologists an opportunity to study a close-knit family on a much deeper and more personalized level. Much of what we learn about the Stephensons is tied to discrete moments in the life of the family through regional events such as the April 18, 1906 San Francisco earthquake (refuse pits 20 and 24), neighborhood experiences such as the 1898 explosion (Sanborn maps and newspaper articles) and personal experiences, such as the deaths of Emily in 1936 and Charles F. in 1942 (refuse pit 6). The continued use of a privy (23) tells the life story of the family from before 1905 until the extended family’s departure from the household they grew up in, around 1943.

The Sanborn map above shows all of the archaeological features discovered as part of the High Street excavation. The Stephenson family lot is highlighted in blue. The archaeological features that were fully excavated are highlighted in pink (6, 20, 23, and 24).
Some aspects of the family’s changing circumstances, in response to the neighborhood and regional events can be inferred through comparison of Sanborn maps. When these maps are overlaid as the Sanborn map composite shows, buildings in the 1897 map damaged in the July 19, 1898 explosion at the Western Fuse and Explosive Company have been completely replaced by new buildings as shown in the 1912 map. Another difference between the two maps is the increased number and size of buildings on the lot, a reflection of the growing needs of a close-knit family, consisting of Gladys (age 7), Charles (age 10), Henrietta (age 16), Amy (age 18), William (age 21), Walter (age 23), and Emily and Charles.

Analysis of the Stephenson family artifacts has allowed for an important window into how a working class family coped with the social, political, and economic stresses of early twentieth century America. These are some of the things we have learned about the Stephenson family through the archaeological record.

1) Artifacts found in the refuse pits and privy reflect frugal spending, in keeping with the economic limitations of the household during the Great Depression. This can be seen through home production, recycling and the practice of retaining items until they became unserviceable.

2) There may have been social and political differences in the household reflecting state and national debates.

3) There are more alcohol containers found in refuse pits prior to the onset of the Prohibition era in 1920 than after its repeal in 1933. This may reflect Stephenson family members’ changing attitude toward social drinking as demonstrated through the YMCA badge.

4) Analysis of diet through cow, pig, and sheep bones suggest that the hardship of the Depression era influenced the purchase of lower grade meat cuts.
Features 6, 20, 23 and 24 - Privy and Trash Pits

Combined with historical and architectural evidence, the four archaeological features associated with the Charles F. Stephenson household offer a rare opportunity to examine changes in a single family over four decades. While archaeologists were supervising a backhoe as it removed roadway fill in the historically sensitive area bisected by the former Stephenson family lot, they observed the tops of several discrete areas where concentrations of artifacts were associated with soil that was slightly different in color and texture than the surrounding earth. Closer inspection of these areas by archaeologists enabled them to clearly define three refuse pits and a privy that contained a wealth of artifacts.

Feature 23: Stephenson privy prior to excavation

Feature 6: Large refuse pit prior to excavation. This pit was used twice to dispose of household items after the deaths of Emily in 1936 and Charles in 1943.
Feature 6 - Refuse Pit

The pit was dug originally for the clear out of household items after Emily’s death in 1936. Among items likely associated with Emily’s life, the most noteworthy point to her interest in gardening, such as a birdbath, flowerpots, and a bonsai container. This may also suggest that she shared her pursuit with Japanese neighbors that began to move onto the block in the 1910s'. That impression is amplified by three saucers of Japanese origin that may have been used during social visits with Japanese friends.

In contrast to the friendship and neighborliness of Emily toward the Japanese families, the discovery of a delegate badge for the Native Sons of the Golden West (NSGW) badge in the final filling of the refuse pit, suggests that there may have been strong differences within the Stephenson household over immigration issues. This group was active in stirring up anti-immigrant sentiments in California, particularly targeting Chinese and Japanese people (Chan 1991; Takaki 1998). Whether the pin’s owner followed the political views of the NSGW cannot be proven, but the integration of oral histories and old family photographs suggests there was a degree of “neighborliness” present. This type of firsthand evidence is crucial in presenting a balanced history of the High Street neighborhood families’ daily interactions.
Nearly Neighbors
The Stephenson Family
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Feature 6 - Refuse Pit

Two unusual artifacts were recovered from the refuse pit. The Native Sons of the Golden West (NSGW) and the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) badges offer glimpses into the possible social and political outlook of some family members during a time when there was heightened anti-immigrant sentiment and economic hardship sweeping California and the nation.
Feature 20 and 24 - Refuse Pits

Two shallow refuse pits were found only a few feet from each other and probably would have been dug by one or two members of the Stephenson family around the same time. Using artifacts from the trash pits, such as ceramic tiles made by American Encaustic Tiling Company and Sanborn maps, archaeologists were able to suggest that these refuse pits were dug in 1906, quite possibly after the April 18, 1906 San Francisco earthquake, maybe in response to the subsequent disruption in garbage collection. These refuse pits were certainly not dug after 1912, as the 1912 Sanborn map shows a building (see composite Sanborn map) on top of the refuse pits. The presence of terra cotta flue pipe fragments in Pit 20 also suggests the refuse pit was dug after the earthquake, as tall vertical features like flues would have been particularly susceptible to damage from such a tremor.

Features 20 and 24: partially excavated refuse pits

Excavation of refuse pits 20 and 24

Selection of artifacts excavated from the refuse pits
Feature 23 - Privy

Due to the alignment of the new highway overpass, Oakport Street needed to be moved west. This gave archaeologists an opportunity to investigate an area that had once been the former back lots of several families on the High Street tract, where the likelihood of finding privies, refuse pits, and so forth would be higher. As removal of the asphalt and the roadbed below commenced, it became apparent that the area had been severely disturbed through construction of Oakport Street, the onramp to I-880, and underground utilities. However, as the investigation neared completion, a rectangular wood-lined privy was discovered. The upper portion of the privy had been sheared away by freeway ramp construction in the 1950s, but enough remained to allow archaeologists to excavate the privy’s lower portion.

Analysis of the artifacts and their dates allowed archaeologists to suggest that the privy remained in use until the family abandoned the property in 1943. No archaeological evidence of a sewer line or septic system was found during investigation of all known residential structures and the rear yard. While rural properties still commonly used privies into the 1940s and beyond, the use of a privy on the Stephensons’ urban lot as late as 1941 is unusual.

Personal items such as buttons and buckles

Doll legs

Selection of artifacts recovered from the privy