19th Century Oakland

The growth of Oakland and its surrounding communities was linked to the success of San Francisco. Oakland was an early industrial center, supplying goods and services to those across the San Francisco Bay who had fewer natural resources to exploit as well as a more limited land base within which to operate. Oakland also became an ideal location for more inexpensive housing for working-class families. Oakland was a city reliant on good transportation methods for commuting and exporting products.

In 1863 a wharf was constructed at the foot of Seventh Street to provide ferry service to San Francisco, and a daily rail service along Seventh Street connected downtown Oakland to the ferry terminal. The following year the San Francisco and Alameda Railroad Company began service to Brooklyn Township and the Melrose District at 46th Avenue (The Caltrans project falls within the Melrose District). Schooner service was also provided to San Francisco from Clark’s Landing on San Leandro Bay.

The 1878 Thompson & West map (see right) shows the archaeologically sensitive area as part of a land tract owned by H. Robinson. The 1880 census record tells of a neighborhood that included many farmers and dairymen. A large percentage of the residents were originally from the British Islands, Canada, and the United States. The population was relatively young and there were many children.
Nearly Neighbors
History of High Street

Despite the almost rural impression of the area from the census manuscripts, there were many industrial works operating in the neighborhood. The abundance of land and close proximity to the water made this area an ideal location for large factories and warehouses. The area was promoted in one of Oakland’s newspapers as a model location for both industrial and residential use.

With its background of gently sloping lands from the hills for residence purposes and a great stretch of level land for the accommodation of factories, warehouses, and other lines of business, it could hardly be possible to find a finer situation for the founding of a great city [Oakland Tribune 7 July 1907].

Around the turn of the 19th Century the population of Melrose continued to be primarily those of western-European descent, now including many from Germany, Switzerland, and the Low Countries. Occupations continued to be working class, but there was an increase in clerical and professional jobs such as clerks, teachers, and engineers. Norman Pryde and his family were the first to build a home in the archaeologically sensitive portion of the Caltrans retrofit project in 1889. Pryde acquired the lot on May 24 from the Puget Sound Lumber Company (Alameda County Deeds 373:259) and was listed in an 1889–1890 City Directory as an employee of the Melrose Smelting Works residing in Melrose. By 1892–1893 he was listed more specifically on Clark Street.

Residential development was present by 1897 on all three of the city lots where archaeological features were found during excavation. The Sanborn (1897) fire insurance map (below) shows houses and outbuildings on Lot C (later 4411 Clement), Lot A (later 4425 Clement) and Lot B (later 4501/4513 Clement). Just two years later the 1899 Block Book indicates a local disaster that occurred in the archaeologically sensitive area and the surrounding vicinity. All properties on the block had been damaged or destroyed by an “explosion.” Further research led to an amazing story about the explosion and the destruction it caused. (See “Six Blown to Eternity.”)
The Melrose District received a huge influx of home-seekers after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. Three years later, Oakland annexed 7855 ha (30.33 sq. mi.) of Brooklyn Township, including Fruitvale, Melrose, and Fitchburg. The population in our study area remained remarkably stable after the 1898 explosion, perhaps because the Western Fuse Company relocated. Most owners rebuilt and stayed in the neighborhood. Most were primarily western European and American-born until the 1920s.

Municipal utility services greatly improved following the turn of the century. Oakland's first sewer was installed in 1864 from Fourth and Broadway to San Antonio Creek. By 1872 the city's growth prompted the initial planning of an expanded system that included approximately sixty miles of drainage pipes that would empty into Lake Merritt. The system was constructed between 1874 and 1876, although it could not handle both storm runoff and the volume of sewage, and caused severe pollution in the lake.

Finally, beginning in the mid-1890s, the city installed a sewer system that carried waste out into the San Francisco Bay. The system was expanded and modernized, connecting the newly annexed areas of Brooklyn and Melrose (Bagwell 1982:131). Water pipes were installed beneath High Street and San Leandro Road by 1903 (Sanborn 1903). By the early part of the mid-20th century, water, sewer, electrical, and gas lines had been installed throughout the construction limits (Heidecker 1999:8).

Completion of the Bay Bridge in 1936 affected the use of the railroad and consequently the surrounding neighborhoods. With increased automobile transportation and a new route to San Francisco, living near a railroad depot became less important. The result was an exodus of middle- and upper-income families to more distant suburbs. At the same time, Oakland’s population soared with the influx of military personnel and recruitment of factory workers from the south during World War II. The High Street Homes, built in 1944 southeast of the study area, consisted of 540 “temporary” residential units to house white wartime workers. Although considered temporary, they were used as low-income housing into the early 1960s.

The last trains served Melrose Station in 1941. Increased auto traffic resulted in the construction of the East Shore Freeway (now Interstate Route 880) in 1949 to 1950. The freeway included the High Street Overhead structure whose retrofit was the impetus for this archaeological project. Construction of the freeway included right-of-way acquisition that encompassed the last home still occupied in the sensitive portion of the study area (4425 Clement) by 1943 (Alameda County Official Records 4452:461). The owners of the steel fabrication business at 4411 Clement successively acquired the remainder of the Rodda property (the entire south end of the block including 4501 Clement) in 1945 and the rest of the Stephenson property by 1951 (Alameda County Official Records 6421:437–438).