

Capitola's First City Hall Awarded Blue Plaque

Historic Buildings

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The site of Capitola's first City Hall will be honored with a Blue Plaque as part of the Museum of Art and History's annual Historical Landmark award ceremony on Saturday, May 7. The small cottage, located on the corner of Lawn Way and Monterey Avenue, did temporary duty from 1949 to 1950 while the permanent City Hall was being built. The building is currently the site of Clothes Garden.

The Blue Plaque program was initiated in 1973 by the Santa Cruz Historical Society, a predecessor to the Museum of Art and History. The Museum's Historical Preservation Committee bestows the plaques on buildings at least 50 years old which it deems to be of exceptional historical or architectural significance. One Committee member is Carolyn Swift, Director of the Capitola Historical Museum. It was the Capitola Museum which nominated the old City Hall for the plaque.

"In 1947, Capitola was about to become incorporated [as a city]," Swift said. "The community got together and decided to build the City Hall. Harlan P. Kessler, a real estate and insurance agent, arranged for them to



Brad Macdonald, 27 (far left), was elected to Capitola's first council 1949 and was the top vote getter in that election. Many thought this would mean Macdonald would be appointed mayor, but the council appointed Harlan P. Kessler (fourth from left) in a surprise move that caused much protest. The Council posed later that year in front of the earliest city hall at 140 Monterey Avenue. The building will be honored with a historical plaque on May 7. Today, Capitola's first city hall is a clothing store.

get the site at 420 Capitola Avenue, where the current City Hall is."

However, it was not a city hall that was built that year but a community hall. According to Swift, members of the first City Council assumed that it would be able to take the community hall and use it for a city hall. But the

Chamber of Commerce refused to part with it, declaring that the new city needed a community hall just as much as a city hall.

"They had a fight over it, and that was one of the reasons that Capitola was initially called 'Scrapitola,'" Swift said. "Originally [city founders] started off by having a lot of

arguments."

A Crowded Place

Sam Bright, planning commissioner and Capitola's first Justice of the Peace, stepped in as peacemaker. He allowed the city to use his modest cottage for city hall. It is this cottage that is the subject of the current award. For

a time the police department, public works department and city offices all shared crowded quarters together.

"The interesting thing was that the City was so poor that the council members paid for their own postage stamps," Swift said. "It just had no money at all."

Meanwhile, the disputed community hall was rebuilt and refurbished to become the permanent city hall in 1950. It has since been replaced by the current city hall at the same location, dedicated in 1977.

Swift noted that the Blue Plaque is purely an honorary award and does not confer any legal obligations to maintain the building in its historical condition. However, in this case building owner Craig French had no particular reservations. French, manager of Red Tree Properties, is a former Capitola Public Works Department employee who is very supportive of historical preservation, said Swift. She recalled him painting the Capitola Museum some 40 years ago.

French will be one of this year's recipients, accepting his Blue Plaque at the award ceremony. Slides will be shown of some houses that have received plaques in the past. Certificates of appreciation from the Santa Cruz City Historic Preservation Committee will also be awarded. The award ceremony will be conducted at the MAH Auditorium at 1 p.m. on May 7. □