

A restored mansion provides a glimpse of one family's life in Victorian-era San Francisco



# Time Capsule

**T**he problem with history is the constant temptation to shade it with the colors of our own time. Take the multihued Victorian-era houses known as the “Painted Ladies,” a popular tour stop in San Francisco. The proper Victorian set would have had little to do with “painted ladies” of any kind. Yet to many, the houses have come to typify the era. In truth, accenting the architectural details of Victorians with different pastels or more brightly colored paints wouldn’t become popular until the 1960s and ’70s.

A true Victorian lady or gentleman would give a demure but approving nod to the city’s Haas-Lilienthal House. A captivating example of Queen Anne-style architecture, the house embodies the ornate elegance of its day while sedately dressed in a historically accurate shade of grayish green.

Determining and re-creating that particular color was part of a meticulous restoration of the Haas-Lilienthal House in 2018. It combined detective work, creative repair, and painstaking craftsmanship to bring the house—built in 1886 for William and Bertha Haas—back to its former glory. The work not only restored an architectural landmark and the only Victorian house museum in

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the city that is open to the public, but also preserved an important piece of history: the story of the Jewish immigrant community that helped to build modern San Francisco.

That legacy was one reason why the National Trust added the house to its National Treasures program, which highlights endangered places that have contributed to our shared national history, in 2012. “The National Trust recognized the Haas-Lilienthal House as an important historic site that interprets Jewish heritage,” says Mike Buhler, president and CEO of San Francisco Heritage (also known as SF Heritage), the preservation group that operates the house.

The restoration is helping SF Heritage forge a stronger connection with current-day San Francisco, bringing the story of the Haas-Lilienthal House to a wider audience.



**William Haas was only 16** when he arrived in the United States from his native Bavaria in 1868. He worked his way across the country, ending up in San Francisco, where he became a clerk and eventually a partner in a cousin’s wholesale grocery business. By the time he and his wife, the former Bertha Greenebaum, built their impressive 26-room home in fashionable Pacific Heights, they were active members of both the Jewish and larger communities, giving

time and money to a range of civic and charitable endeavors.

“The family is a notable family in San Francisco,” says Buhler, “one of a small cohort of Jewish families that have a really important philanthropic legacy in the city and continue to be very active today.”

William and Bertha Haas had three children, and their youngest daughter, Alice, married Samuel Lilienthal, the son of a liquor company founder. The couple moved into the house in 1916, after William’s death. They remained there the rest of their lives, and the family then gave it to SF Heritage in 1973. The gift provided the nonprofit with a historically and architecturally significant Victorian dwelling, but it also came with a financial burden. “When I started in 2010, the house had been suffering from years of neglect,” says Buhler. “[SF Heritage] simply did not have the resources to properly keep up the building.”

The house did not meet accessibility standards or fire codes, had outdated electrical wiring, and needed repairs inside and out. It was also facing a decline in visitor numbers and event rentals. “It was quickly becoming an albatross for the organization,” Buhler says.

The estimated cost of restoration was in the millions. SF Heritage commissioned a feasibility study that concluded a capital campaign might raise \$200,000 to \$250,000. It decided to proceed anyway.





*Previous page:* The Haas-Lilienthal House in San Francisco was designed by Peter R. Schmidt and built by McCann & Biddell in the late 1800s. *Opposite and this page:* The Queen Anne-style house's original woodwork and wallpaper were restored as part of a comprehensive preservation project completed in 2018.







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Buhler believes the National Treasure designation was instrumental in helping the campaign succeed far beyond expectations. “That was really a critical turning point,” he says, “because it elevated the significance of the house both locally and nationally.”

Over five years the group raised more than \$4.3 million, helped by the active participation of the Haas-Lilienthal family—particularly Alice Russell-Shapiro and John Rothmann, great-grandchildren of William and Bertha Haas. The money went toward repairs and helped fund SF Heritage’s citywide mission. It also paid for a new interpretive and education plan put together with the aid of the National Trust, which conducted visitor surveys and led a visioning workshop with the SF Heritage board.

“One of our findings in the surveys we did with the National Trust was that the house was basically invisible in the local community,” Buhler says. “People did not know about it; 85 percent of our visitors were from out of town. So in tandem with taking care of the physical needs of the house, we developed a fairly comprehensive business plan to make the house more relevant locally.”



**A 134-year-old house** comes with a lot of history—and a lot of old paint. Crews for Teevan, a local contractor specializing in historic restoration, began their work by stripping up to 20 coats off parts of the Haas-Lilienthal House.

As they stripped the exterior, they found that parts of it were basically being held together by that old paint. Dry rot had invaded segments of the redwood siding. “The south facade was by far the worst. On probably every other, if not every, nail hole the nails had rusted and caused minor wood rot,” says Nicolas Beckman, Teevan project manager. “We had to perform epoxy repairs, hundreds of them. We would dig out the nail and put in a stainless-steel screw and then epoxy the damaged wood area.”

The company also re-created and replaced pieces of trim and other boards that were too far gone. Molly Lambert, a Bay Area architectural conservator, took 42 paint samples and subjected them to a detailed microscopic analysis to determine the house’s original palette. SF Heritage worked with Dunn-Edwards Paints, which donated the interior and exterior paint, to reproduce not just the colors but also the exact sheen of that first coat.

“The issue of what color to paint the exterior of the house was a very emotional one,” says Buhler. “In San Francisco, many people



*Opposite:* A 1927 Magic Chef range dominates the eat-in kitchen; *This page, from top:* Grasscloth wallpaper surrounds the mantelpiece in the second-floor sitting room; A tiled fireplace in one of the bedrooms provided warmth on chilly San Francisco nights.





are accustomed to the Painted Ladies.” Visitors occasionally express disappointment that the building is not cloaked in more vibrant hues, he acknowledges, “but overall, people appreciate that they are seeing an authentic Victorian restored to its appearance from that era.”

SF Heritage faced another question, a common one in preservation, when considering the interior: whether to try to restore it to a particular point in time early in its life, or to retain the alterations made by the Haas-Lilienthal family over the years. Buhler and his colleagues decided to honor the family’s long history in the house and keep the alterations, a choice made easier because so much of the structure and its appointments was still original.

“What’s really significant about the house from the architectural perspective is its high level of integrity,” says architect Deborah J. Cooper, a principal at San Francisco’s Architectural Resources Group (ARG) who guided the restoration with general contractor Oliver and Company. “Every detail is still in place because it was owned by the same family until it was transferred to [SF] Heritage.”

Because the house was so intact, it required a creative approach to restoration. “It had such a high level of historic finishes and historic integrity. Some of the ways we did things here were different than when we typically work with historic buildings in terms of bringing them up to code,” Cooper says.

For example, she notes, in many cases ARG would replace door hardware to make entrances and exits wheelchair accessible. But the original hardware on the Haas-Lilienthal doors was unusually ornate and worth preserving. “So instead we looked at very simple [accessibility] strategies like keeping doors in their open position,” she says.

In order to keep the period atmosphere, ARG found ways to make even major changes as unobtrusive as possible. It squeezed in a code-conforming restroom without intruding on the basement-level ballroom by replacing the ancient boiler with a smaller unit. A mandated exterior fire escape descends not into the backyard but into the shell of an old pantry, so it’s less visible from the outside.

One of the bigger challenges was patching and repairing the original, deeply embossed Lincrusta wallpaper that decorates the interior. Johana Moreno, a senior conservator with ARG Conservation Services (a sister company to ARG), experimented with different materials before settling on a heavy cotton paper as a base. She hand-painted it with dimensional fabric paint to replicate the pattern, slowly building up layer after layer until she had the proper depth in the design.

“I created the pattern first, and then, when that was dry, I started working with the color,” she says. “Once I cut the paper and put it

*From top:* The house’s varied exterior wall textures characterize the Queen Anne style; Johana Moreno of ARG Conservation Services applies a tinted, oil-based varnish to the front doors.

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in place, some colors were a little bit off, and I ended up having to retouch and do painting on site.”

The interior woodwork received similar attention. Moreno and her colleagues carefully matched the stain and filled scratches to bring the trim back to life. The work, she notes, “was very, very detail oriented, scratch by scratch, painting delicately. That way we didn’t have to overload the surface with a new stain or new finish.”

This obsessive focus on detail resulted in a restored Victorian house that feels, in the rooms open to the public, as if the family has just stepped out for a stroll. The only challenge left was to get more of the public into those rooms.



**The Haas-Lilienthal House** survived the 1906 earthquake and fires that destroyed much of San Francisco. It survived the Great Depression that ruined many wealthy families and the 1989 earthquake that caused billions of dollars’ worth of damage in the Bay Area. Now, the plan is to survive the pandemic of 2020.

As of press time, house tours, private events, and special programs had all been canceled, and it was unclear when the site would be reopened to the public. “The outlook is very uncertain,” says Buhler.

Until the pandemic hit, the site’s public programs were bringing in a wider audience, he adds. In a 2018 partnership with the Joe Goode Performance Group, for example, the dance and theater troupe developed a show tailored to the site. “Every room had specific vignettes— theater, spoken word, and dance throughout the house,” Buhler says. “It was amazingly creative. The month-long run was completely sold out and was extended.” Mayhem Mansion, an annual Halloween haunted house, attracts 1,300 to 1,500 people and uses a script containing details about the house’s history and construction. Victorian-themed teas and balls have also been popular.

SF Heritage has been taking advantage of the unexpected downtime to provide access to the house in other ways. For example, it’s taken an existing self-guided audio tour and repositioned it as part of a new virtual tour complete with home movies, historic images, and contemporary photography. (The tour is viewable on SF Heritage’s website, [sfheritage.org](http://sfheritage.org), and on YouTube.)

As it copes with the economic implications of the pandemic, the Haas-Lilienthal House benefits from its status as a mixed-use property. SF Heritage has its offices in the upper floors and rents


out a 1927 addition in the back as an apartment. The latter, Buhler says, “is a significant source of income for the organization. It’s definitely helped sustain the museum financially.”

The pandemic is the latest chapter in the long history of a house that embodies much more than Victorian-era architecture. Alice



*Clockwise from left: Charles, Florine, and Alice Haas around 1890; The children’s mother, Bertha Haas; Their father, William Haas. Alice moved back into the house in 1916 with her husband, Samuel Lilienthal, and lived there until her death in 1972.*

Russell-Shapiro never lived there, but she visited often as a child. She remembers playing with a train set, now on display on the lower level; the excitement of holiday gatherings; and sitting down to “traditional family Sunday dinners.”

Her family succeeded, grew, and stayed proud of their roots at the same time as they enthusiastically embraced San Francisco. “It’s a slice of life that is worthy of being preserved for everybody to see,” Russell-Shapiro says. “How a certain Jewish immigrant family of the era—representative of other similar families—how they lived, what they valued, how they became Americans.” 

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