

# The house that ??? built

By George R. Vincent

Pinole has had three imposing historic homes constructed on hills — the Fernandez Mansion (1894), the Downer Mansion (1900), and the Faria farmhouse, built sometime in the late 19th century.

Recently, a resident took the Pinole Historical Society's self-guided downtown walking tour. Stop #5b was the transplanted Faria House at 2100 San Pablo Avenue (the future home of the Pinole History Museum).

The tour brochure states William Allen built the house in 1891 for his daughter as a wedding gift when she married James H. Tennent. However, upon researching the home's past on the Internet, the inquirer found it was built in 1880 by Dr. Samuel J. Tennent for his newly wedded son, James.

A romantic pair of tales to be sure, but which version is correct, if either?

The Faria House, known in earlier days as the home of James Hugh Tennent, has always had question marks as to its builder, date of construction, and its chain of occupants.

Much of the landmark's history has been based upon local legends of memory, historical speculation, or Tennent family folklore. Since this home may someday be a candidate to house Pinole's museum, it is important to set the historical record straight.

After researching this at the Oakland History Center at the Mormon Temple, Contra Costa County Historical Society, newspaper, census and county vital statistics records, family genealogy records, and local folklore, I have solved the mystery of the Faria House construction and occupancy.

We must start with Pinole's pioneer resident and founder, Dr. Samuel J. Tennent.

In 1849, he married Rafaela Martinez, who had inherited 1/11 of El Rancho Pinole. This included all land north of present I-80 freeway to downtown Pinole, as well as the entire bay waterfront.

In 1850, Dr. Tennent built Pinole's first wooden home on their ranch site as a present to his new bride. The large ranch stretched west and east of Pinole Valley Road from today's Pinole Valley Lanes to Collins School. Here, the couple had ten children.

Rafaela died in 1868 at the age of 44. James Hugh Tennent was their oldest son, delivered by midwife in 1856. James Tennent would become the caretaker of his father's stories of life on Rancho El Pinole in the 1850s and 1860s.

Research from archives gives clues to the home's background:

- Kathryn Burns Plummer, granddaughter of Samuel J. Tennent, remembered: "James H. Tennent and his family lived in the Tennent ranch house until they built a new and larger house on a hill across the road." Local history has always dated this event in 1880.
- Tennent family genealogy states: "The eldest son, James, built the large house across the Valley Road after his marriage and lived there many years."
- James Tennent died at age 91 in 1948. His long obituary read in part: "Jim married Louise Allen of Pinole and built for his bride the home which is now owned and occupied by the William Faria Family."

Answers may also be inferred from a timeline of sources:

1. August 16, 1886: Samuel Tennent died.
2. July 4, 1887: James H. Tennent married Louise Delcina Allen, a school teacher.
3. James Tennent was 32 and Louise was 29. They married in Alameda, her hometown.
4. September 1888: Tennent heirs (James, John, and Kate Tennent Cousins) partitioned the Tennent Ranch into divisions.
5. 1888: first child, Samuel Edward Tennent, died at birth.
6. The couple's six children were born between 1888 and 1895. All three sons died early.
7. 1890: The couple's next son, James Allen Tennent, died.
8. From 1892-1897: Voting registers placed James Tennent as a Pinole resident and butcher.
9. 1897: Louise Tennent and children are living in the Tennent home.
10. 1898: James Tennent left Pinole for the Klondike Gold Rush in Alaska.
11. 1900: James and Louise Tennent's home was now in Claremont, Alameda County. His occupation was listed as a miner by a census-taker.
12. 1905-1926: Tennent returned from Alaska and settled with his wife on a cotton ranch in San Joaquin Valley.
13. 1912: The James Tennent home in Pinole was purchased by Joseph and Maria Faria from Kate Tennent Cousins.
14. 1926: The Tennent family resided in Berkeley.
15. 1927: Louisa Tennent died in San Francisco at age 68.
16. 1928-1936: James was a retired cotton grower living in Kensington. An 80th birthday party was given by his two daughters.
17. July 1948: James Tennent died at age 91.

### **What is known of William Allen?**

Allen was an Irish immigrant born in 1819 and resided in Alameda. His wife was Margaret Allen. They had six children; a daughter, Louise, was the second oldest.

Allen made his living as a carpenter. In 1887, he was 68 years old when his daughter married James Tennent.

The evidence shows that James Tennent indeed built his elegant two-story home on a knoll across from the family ranch after his father's death. There is also truth in the charming, prevailing story that he built it as a wedding gift for his new bride — and quite possibly for his new family as well.

However, this was done closer to 1888 or 1889, not in 1880, as James Tennent was not yet married then.

Samuel J. Tennent died the year before his son's marriage. Therefore, he could not have given the home as a wedding gift to his son. The couple named their first-born son in the grandfather's honor, but sadly, the infant died shortly after birth.

There is always the possibility that during his son's engagement in 1886 that the father made the promise to give the land and build the house as part of James's inheritance. Hence, the origin of the story of the father's wedding gift to James.

It is interesting that James did not marry until after his father's death.

It seems James Tennent followed his father's footsteps in life. Both were Gold Rush seekers, and James's father had also built a new home for his bride, Rafaela, in 1850.

It would have taken a year or more to build the James Tennent home. Even the 1891 date seems plausible, as one reliable source stated: Tennent's "family" lived in the father's ranch house after his marriage to Louise.

There, they would have had access to servants to help with their new offspring while the house was being built. Also, Louise was pregnant with their fourth child in 1891.

James Tennent married at age 32, which was rather late for the time period. Louise, who was living in Pinole, was 29 and possibly teaching school in the area.

It seems the couple spent the first two years of their marriage living at Samuel Tennent's family ranch home until it became crowded with arrivals of children back-to-back-to-back in 1888, 1889, and 1890.

James Tennent undoubtedly wanted to strike out on his own with the building of a larger house than his father's on the 4.5-acre parcel.

From 1888 to 1898, James and Louise Tennent raised their young family in the new home. When James left for Alaska in 1898, Louise must have had her own family's support if she stayed in the big house.

In 1900, she was living in the Claremont district of Oakland. So, she may have moved the family out to be nearer to the Allen family for help, as her youngest child was only three.

The house probably saw a succession of renters or new owners after the Tennents moved out around 1900 and before Kate Tennent Cousins, the oldest family heir, sold it to the Farias in 1912.

The story of William Allen building the home in 1891 for his daughter's marriage does not seem likely. She married in 1887, not in 1891. The Tennent family estate owned the land on which the home was built, not Allen.

Then, too, as a carpenter he probably was not a wealthy man, as carpenters made about \$4 a day at the time. With five other children to support, he could not afford to be so generous in home giving to one daughter.

However, it seems William Allen had some connection to Pinole, since his daughter lived there before her marriage. Since Allen was a carpenter, perhaps he or his sons did play a part in the actual hammer and nail physical construction or furnishing of the home, despite Allen's advanced age.

Hence, the comingling of the two stories as to who built the home for the daughter or new bride as a wedding present — Samuel Tennent, James Tennent, or William Allen.

The James and Louise Tennent home was built for a large family unit. Its large staircase, banisters and drawing room never lacked for playful children's footsteps and laughter. Margaret, Mary, and John Tennent lived there with their parents. Their sibling, May, died as an infant in 1891. The youngest son, John, died at age 15.

When the Farias moved in with their brood of some 14 offspring in 1912, it became the "Faria House," as it is known today. Eventually, three generations of Farias grew up there.

In 2005, the house was moved to Heritage Park in downtown Pinole — #5b on the PHS Walking Tour.

The local mythology that once surrounded the home has also now been moved away to reveal much about the home's occupants and its true early history.