

Orinda Saves Old Bricks for New City Hall

By Andrea A. Firth



Todd Skinner and Ann O'Connell-Nye outside City hall where the new bricks will be installed

Photo Tod Fierner

When Orinda incorporated as a city in 1985, the city offices were located in an annex to the Community Center (the former Orinda Union Elementary School site) with the main entrance just steps from Orinda Way. Todd Skinner, current Director of the Parks and Recreation Department for Orinda, was working in the city offices back then. He recalls that the entrance to the building was greatly enhanced through the efforts and generosity of a number of Orinda residents. "Individuals and families purchased engraved bricks to help fund the project. The bricks were then incorporated into the building of the steps, fountain, and landscaping of the entranceway," explained Todd.

About eight years ago, when the building that housed the city offices was demolished in order to build the Orinda Library, the bricks were on a path to the landfill. In stepped longtime Orinda resident Ann O'Connell-Nye. As a former member of the Historical Society and Chair of the Historic Landmarks Committee, Ann values the preservation of the city's past. "My family purchased one of those bricks over 20 years ago. So when I learned that the bricks were to be removed, I contacted the City Council with a proposal to salvage the bricks and to reuse them in the building of the new City Hall," said O'Connell-Nye, "And they agreed."

The brick salvage operation was quite successful with only 40 of the original 150 bricks lost due to breakage. Unfortunately, the size and specifications for building-grade bricks had changed over the years, so the decision was recently made to purchase new bricks engraved with the residents' names as before. O'Connell-Nye, resident Sheyla Kantor, and city officials had carefully compiled a list of the brick donors' names, and they now await a shipment of 150 newly engraved bricks.

The bricks will be set in the ground surrounding the flagpole by the upper entrance of City Hall. An original boulder and commemorative plaque from the old city offices' entrance will be moved to the location as well. "It's important to preserve history and document the changes," noted Ann O'Connell-Nye. To that end, an additional plaque explaining the trail of the bricks and recognizing the monetary contribution of the Orinda Parks and Recreation Foundation to the new project will also be included in the display.

So what will happen to the pile of old bricks? Once again, Ann O'Connell-Nye has stepped in to save a little bit of Orinda's past. "I know I want to keep my family's original engraved brick," said Ann. She plans to contact the individual residents to coordinate the return of their bricks.

It may not be a piece of the Berlin Wall, but it is a great piece of local history. Who knows, we may see the great, great-grandchild of an Orinda brick owner on Antiques Roadshow looking for the story behind the old brick, and of course—the value of their little piece of history.

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