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Four pillars of Orinda honored by trees planted at the Old Yellow House

By Sora O'Doherty



From left: David Nelson, James Wright, James Hale, Toris Jaeger, and Natalie and Peter Stewart (representing the de Laveaga family). Photo Sora O'Doherty

James Wright, who nearly a decade ago bought and restored the Old Yellow House, an historic property in Orinda, is in the process of converting it to a museum of sustainability. On Saturday, March 12, there was a ceremonial tree planting on the grounds in honor of four significant members of the community and to launch the educational use of the property.

David Nelson is the grandson of the family that preserved the Old Yellow House in 1918. The building was intended to house railroad workers on the California Nevada Railroad. The structure was never occupied by the company, however, owing to its bankruptcy at the end of the railroad era. The Charles Nelson family lived on the property from 1918 through 1966, after which the property was left vacant and unaltered until purchased by Wright in 2012.

Toris Jaeger is the creator and educator at the Orinda Nature Area, located beside Wagner Ranch Elementary School. For over 30 years, Jaeger has been teaching

Orinda students in the outdoors environment. She is an advocate of the experiential way of teaching.

James Hale is also a naturalist and environmental guardian of Contra Costa County. Affectionately known as Doc Hale, he has been a professional vertebrate zoologist, certified wildlife biologist, ethnobiologist, and ecological consultant for 46 years. Hale is currently living at the Old Yellow House as its resident naturalist, and will be presenting a number of lectures this summer, ranging from county wildlife to the cultural and natural history of San Pablo Creek.

The de Laveaga family was represented at the tree planting by Erin Stewart and her children, Natalie and Peter. According to the city of Orinda's website, Edward Ignacio de Laveaga established the town site as Orinda in the 1920s. He was the son of San Franciscan Miguel de Laveaga, who, with his brother Jose Vicente, had purchased about 1,200 acres in the area in 1897. Having survived the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco, de Laveaga preferred life in Orinda. The de Laveaga family home, caretaker cottage, working barn and other surrounding buildings, known as "Bien Venida," were built in 1888. In 1915 the main house burned to the ground and, apart from some more modern improvements, was rebuilt very much like the original. There have been de Laveagas living on the property since 1888. In the late '1990s the property was purchased by family members Connie de Laveaga Stoops and her husband Bob and Marty de Laveaga Stewart and her husband Dave. A decades-long project of restoring all of the buildings from new foundations to new roofs and all of the interior spaces is ongoing.

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