

# Early Boathouses

## The Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club

By Richard Cooper, 2019

This article attempts to establish a timeline and tell the story of our original boathouses. The story relies primarily on newspaper articles and public records. Few original documents remain from that era, and Dolphin Club Board Minutes prior to 1899 no longer exist.

The Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club was established in July of 1877. The founders, John Wieland and Valentin Kehrlein, Sr., probably met in a home, restaurant, or beer hall. Soon the Club consisted of twenty-five charter members led by Emil Kehrlein, the first president.<sup>1</sup>

The new Club petitioned the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to put up a boathouse at the foot of Leavenworth Street.<sup>2</sup> Permission was received in April 1878.<sup>3</sup> At the time Columbus was named Montgomery Ave, and Leavenworth St ended at the intersection of North Point Street. Val, J.L., and E. Kehrlein, et al, occupied the southwest corner lot of the intersection.<sup>4</sup>

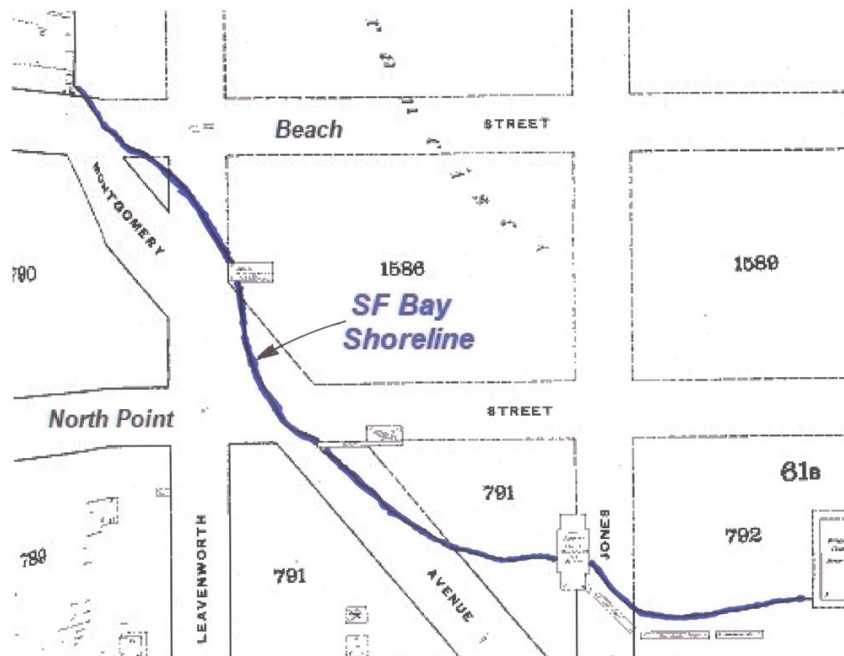


Figure 1

The Sanborn Map of the area in Figure 1 shows the San Francisco Bay shoreline before being filled in the late 1890's.

It took only a month or so to erect the boathouse. A surplus building was acquired from the Union Iron Works.<sup>5</sup> Pilings were driven, and the building placed out on the new pier.



Figure 2

Figure 2 shows the North Beach waterfront with the Dolphin Club boathouse shortly after being built. The club pier is pointed directly east. In August 1879 the Dolphin Club celebrated its second anniversary at the boathouse.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 3

Figure 3 shows the boathouse a few years later from a different angle. The Selby Smelter in the background appears to still be operating based on smoke coming from the stack. The Selby operation was shut down in 1885 and moved to a new plant in Contra Costa County.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 4

Figure 4 is a later photograph of the first boathouse. Shown at the rear (towards land) is a twenty-foot extension added in 1885 providing a dressing room, bath room, and fresh water.<sup>8</sup> A sketch, like the above photograph, was printed in the *SF Chronicle* on March 31, 1894.



Figure 5

Figure 5 is a rare photograph of Club members posing at the first boathouse.

In 1895 the City advised the Club of their plans to extend both Leavenworth and Columbus (named Montgomery Ave then) Streets. Unless the Dolphin Club moved their boathouse it would be buried under tons of sand and rock soon to be dumped on the beach. There was no choice but to move. The first plan was to keep the boathouse, move it, and then add a second story. The eventual decision was to build a new structure on a site to be negotiated with the City.<sup>9</sup>

The original Dolphin Club boathouse was advertised for bids and sold for \$20 in March 1896.<sup>10</sup> It was then moved to 872 North Point Street, renovated, and still exists.<sup>5</sup> It sits behind 880 North Point, cramped on all sides, and is best viewed using satellite photography.

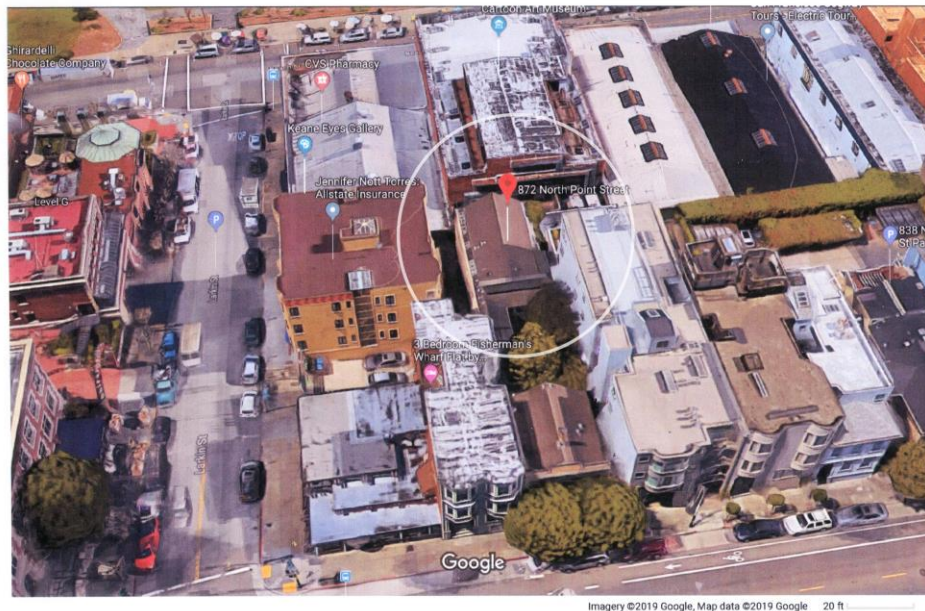


Figure 6

Figure 6 is a view of 872 North Point Street looking towards Aquatic Park.

The Board of Supervisors gave their permission to build a \$2000 modern boathouse at the foot of Van Ness Avenue in the water at the foot of a steep bluff.<sup>11</sup> At that time the end of Van Ness was up on the hill. A path and wooden stairs would lead down to the boathouse. Architect Adolph C. Lutgens, a charter member and club president in 1879, designed the new building. The boathouse was completed in February 1897.<sup>12</sup>

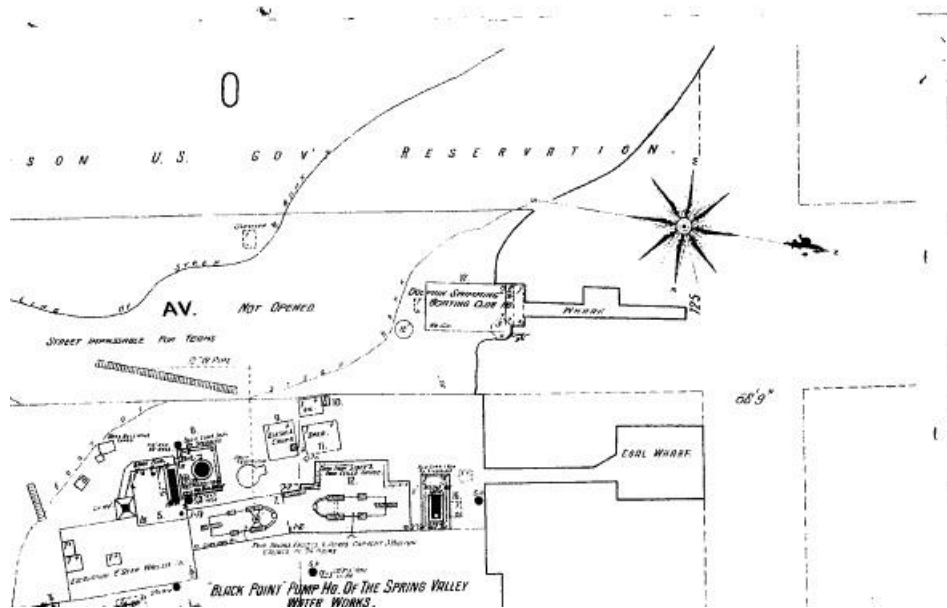


Figure 7

Figure 7 is the 1899 Sanborn Map showing the Dolphin Club in the upper area.



Figure 8

In Figure 8 the new boathouse sits on what is now the west side of Aquatic Park.



Figure 9

Figure 9 catches members posing at the second boathouse.

The sign in the background should look familiar. It now hangs above the long bar in the Club. “A handsome hand-carved sign, emblematic of the Dolphin Club, has been presented to the club by J. and W. Laib who have just become members.”<sup>13</sup> Joseph Laib, Jr. would serve as president of the Club in 1899.

The Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club was the first rowing club to be located in what was then known as Black Point Cove. It would be about ten years later, in 1908, before the South End Rowing Club arrived there, and the Ariel Club built a clubhouse about a year later.

As before, the Dolphin Club had no claim of ownership to the land they occupied. With foresight the boathouse was built so that it could be moved.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it would be moved twice, in 1927 and 1937, before settling at its current location. These moves were forced by the extension of Van Ness Ave, the construction of Muni Pier, and the development of Aquatic Park including the municipal bathhouse (now the Maritime Museum) and grandstand.

Over the years the structure has been enhanced with handball courts, locker rooms, galley, weight room, and the large annex in the 1980’s, however the heart of our boathouse is still the one that once sat alone on Black Point Cove.

## Notes

- 1 *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, August 21, 1877
- 2 *Daily Alta California*, April 3, 1878
- 3 *Daily Alta California*, April 9, 1878
- 4 Handy Block Book of San Francisco, 1894, Published by the Hicks-Judd Company
- 5 *This is San Francisco*, Transcript of KCBS Radio Show, aired October 19, 1950
- 6 *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 25, 1879
- 7 *San Francisco Waterfront*, by Roger R. Olmsted & Nancy L. Olmsted, December 1977, Printed by Techni-Graphics, San Francisco
- 8 *Daily Alta California*, February 2, 1885
- 9 *San Francisco Call*, August 4, 1895
- 10 Dolphin Club Cash Books, entry March 11, 1896
- 11 *San Francisco Call*, November 7, 1895
- 12 *San Francisco Call*, February 6, 1897
- 13 *San Francisco Call*, January 18, 1896