

February 4, 2005

Mr. Wayne Donaldson
California Department of Parks and Recreation
Office of Historic Preservation
P.O. Box 942896
Sacramento, California 94296-0001

Dear Mr. Donaldson:

I write with regard to California Historical Landmark No. 524, the “Juana Briones de Miranda House” located at 4155 Old Adobe Road in the City of Palo Alto. As you know, in years past, questions have been raised about the authenticity of the structure as the former home of Juana Briones de Miranda and about the qualifications of this structure as an appropriate nominee for the California Register of Historical Resources. Most recently, Anthony Kirk, a consultant hired by the present owners of the property, submitted a document to your office in March 2001 challenging virtually all claims about the structure’s authenticity and the historical significance of Juana Briones, the second owner of Rancho La Purísima Concepción. I write to set the record straight. I ask you and your staff to consider the substance of this letter, based on my assessment of a variety of sources, and to reexamine the position of the Office of Historic Preservation concerning the structure in question.

I have devoted my career of over thirty years as a scholar and teacher at Stanford University to recovering and teaching the history of Mexican Americans in California. It is a history that until about a generation ago was largely unknown because historians writing during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ignored and obscured this group’s history. In many cases, especially in the half century following U.S. annexation of California, the history of Mexican-origin people in the state was simply obliterated because Spanish-speaking people were often considered by Anglo American writers and historians as a people not worthy of mention. Juana Briones de Miranda and so many of her contemporaries in nineteenth-century California were the casualties of history as American society and culture took root in the state. One of the state’s leading historians, William Deverell, characterized this glossing over and distortion of Mexican American history in his recent book entitled *White Washed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (University of California Press, 2004). Much of what transpired in Los Angeles in the hundred years after California achieved statehood and that resulted in the submergence of Mexican American history occurred in northern California with even greater intensity.

In what follows, I cite evidence that confirms that the property located at 4155 Old Adobe Road was indeed the home of Juana Briones de Miranda, the main structure of Rancho La Purísima Concepción, and that the core of the present building contains part of the original Briones family home. There is no debate regarding Briones's ownership of the rancho lands. She purchased the land from two former neophyte Indians from Mission Santa Clara in 1844. Her legal title to the rancho was confirmed by the U.S. Board of Land Commissioners in 1854 and was later reconfirmed, after an appeal, by the U.S. District Court. After nearly twenty years of battling to keep rightful ownership to her land, Briones was finally granted free title in 1871. Despite the sale of portions of the original 4,400 acre rancho and subdivision of other lands to her children, Briones continued to live in her home until she moved to the nearby town of Mayfield in the early 1880s to live near one of her daughters. Her youngest daughter, Refugio Miranda de Mesa, received a tract of 40 acres from Briones, including the main house and out structures; Briones' daughter and her husband sold the home to Charles P. Nott in 1900.

In 1969, at the request of the Palo Alto Diamond Anniversary Civic Committee, Dorothy Regnery conducted an assessment of the structure at 4155 Old Adobe Road to help determine its appropriateness for assigning a state plaque designating the home as a historic building. Regnery stated in her report "After careful examination of the house with Mr. Volney Chase, a nationally renowned architect and historical restoration authority, months of searching maps, legal records, literature, photographs, personal correspondence, and conducting numerous interviews, the following are my conclusions: 1. *The site of the living rooms and the stair hall of the present house is that of a house in which Juana Briones, widow of Apolinario Miranda, lived [emphasis mine].*" Although Regnery did not find what she had expected --an old adobe brick structure-- what she did discover, after extensive research, was that "The house was not constructed of adobe brick," but "Some portions of it were constructed of tamped earth within a crude wooden crib." The structure Regnery examined had obviously undergone significant modification over the previous nearly seventy years, but at its core existed the heart of the structure that Juana Briones had built, arguably the longest continuously lived-in structure in Santa Clara County history.

The personal correspondence of Charles Nott to his fiancée in the early years after he purchased the property from Briones' daughter provides further unequivocal evidence that he retained the main portion of the home as he planned modifications and construction of additional rooms. "It is absolutely useless to try to fix up all those little rooms," Nott noted in a letter dated November 11, 1900. "It would amount to building a new house," he claimed. But, importantly, Nott indicated that "the only part it will pay to spend a little money upon is that comprised in the main three rooms. These I shall try to fix." Indeed he did, for photographs from 1908 reveal the exposed north walls of the construction site of the original house built in a construction style involving an earthen interior framed within a wooden cribbing (the Nott family photo was included in the 1997 report entitled "Site of the Juana Briones House Historic Structure Report" by Barbara Judy.)

There is also no question, despite the erroneous assumptions raised by Anthony Kirk, that the house that Nott purchased in 1900 was the same house built by Briones. I have in my possession a map from the first survey taken of Rancho La Purísima Concepción in 1848, and when scaled down to size using computer technology and superimposed onto a contemporary map of Los Altos Hills, this map (which includes detailed boundaries and notations of structures located on the rancho) provides irrefutable evidence of the exact location of “Casa de Juana Briones” as being that of the location of the existing structure on Old Adobe Road. This evidence corrects an error originally made by Regnery, reinforced in the document written by Anthony Kirk, that called into question the location of the original house built by Briones.

In the wake of the American annexation of California and subsequent migration of tens of thousands of Americans into the former Mexican province, newcomers wasted little time in destroying most of the adobe structures that stood in the path of development as Americans acquired rancho and pueblo lands from Mexican landowners. Those adobe structures of varying type that survived the early American period from 1850 to about 1880 were typically covered over with wood siding and adapted to the architectural designs reflective of the regions from which the new Americans had originated. The Briones House, under the ownership of Charles Nott, was one of the structures that survived though it was significantly modified over time.

The Juana Briones de Miranda House is a truly unique artifact of nineteenth century California. The construction of the original house is not of the typical adobe brick style commonly used in Spanish and Mexican California. Indeed, it is a rare construction style that involved the encasing of earthen adobe material inside a wooden framing (a crate-like or lathe-like construction). I have consulted with Edna Kimbro, an expert on historic adobe structures in California who is familiar with the Briones House. She concluded that the type of construction in some of the interior walls of the Briones House contains a “very rare” style of construction. According to Ms. Kimbro, she knows of only one other structure with a comparable construction style that still exists anywhere in the state (the Search Ranch house in Carmel Valley).

In addition to its “rare” construction-style status, the inner walls of the home at 4155 Old Adobe Road belonged to a person who was among a small, select group of women landowners in Mexican California. According to Ernie Garcia (Los Californianos, Expediente Co-chair), Briones was one of only thirty-four women who received patent to their land grant claims as required by the U.S. Land Commission. She was also one of the very few Mexican women who actually purchased a land grant rather than inheriting the property from a deceased husband or other relative. Few, if any, of the original structures located on the lands of these Mexican women currently remain standing. The Briones House must be considered, on these grounds, and on the basis of its rare type of construction, a singularly unique structure of unusual historical significance.

The simple truth about the property located at 4155 Old Adobe Road in Palo Alto is that the core of the structure was once the home of a woman of historical significance in nineteenth-century California. To be sure, “visible” signs of the Briones House have been covered over by various modifications, room additions, and architectural designs reflecting various owners throughout the twentieth century. But the undeniable fact remains that the property and the interior rooms form a fundamentally important link to California’s past. The modifications made to the original structure by Nott and subsequent owners are also testimony to the social and cultural changes –reflected in architectural styles- that are part of California history in the twentieth century, making the current structure even more valuable as a slice of the state’s rich multiethnic history.

The remnants of the home built by Juana Briones –land grant owner, pioneering woman of San Francisco and Santa Clara County, enterprising business woman, *curandera* (Mexican folk healer), and humanitarian of note—faces demolition by the current owners of the property. The Juana Briones Heritage Foundation (JBHF), a group that I recently joined, is attempting to purchase the property before a historical structure falls to the wrecking ball. In an effort to validate and to bring attention to the existence of the structure that Briones built, which lies within the walls of the current home, a clear statement from you will help to inform a public confused by newspaper articles (“State historians question authenticity of P.A. house” *San Jose Mercury News*, 5/13/01) that cited staff from your office who called into question that part of the structure at 4155 Old Adobe Road was indeed the house erected by Juana Briones. The JBHF is not requesting reconsideration of the original nomination to place the Briones House on the California Register of Historical Resources. Rather, the foundation seeks support from your office in the form of a letter affirming the importance of saving California’s history; specifically remnants from pioneer-era California and important minority figures. This history is hidden in the walls of the Juana Briones House and is in jeopardy. The public needs to know that the link between Briones and the property are valid and that the State Office of Historic Preservation supports efforts to save the house. A statement from you will go a long way in assisting the JBHF’s efforts to attract funding for the historic preservation of the building and to create an important learning resource center for the public to learn about California’s diverse history. A statement from your office will play an important role in helping the foundation save this structure from destruction.

Thanking you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Albert M. Camarillo
Professor of History, Stanford University
Miriam and Peter Haas Centennial Professor in Public Service