

Field Guide to Coronado History:

Coronado's Churchill Legacy

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Sometimes history is not about a specific event or a singular accomplishment; it's about a legacy, and sometimes about a legacy that twists and zigzags across many years without any apparent master plan.

Just such a story hides in our city's history ... a story that actually begins during the climactic hours of the battle for Atlanta during the Civil War.

Fierce fighting raged around Atlanta in the early fall of 1864 as the South fought to retain a crucial rail and supply center and an iconic city of the Confederacy. In the midst of the most serious fighting stood the Twenty-seventh Ohio Volunteers of the Army of the Tennessee led by a tall and slender colonel dressed in Union blue, Mendell Churchill.

Churchill had served continuously since the very first days of the Civil War but, at Atlanta, he had been carried wounded from the field for

the first time in the war. Quickly resuming his command, Churchill was field-promoted to Brigadier General for conspicuous gallantry.

Following the war, Churchill returned to Zanesville, Ohio and built a considerable fortune in railroads, iron, and banking. After the death of his wife of many years, Churchill retired from business ventures and traveled the world, in part to discover his perfect retirement setting.

He wintered briefly at the Hotel del Coronado in 1892 and, here, happenstance and legacy crossed paths. After further vacationing in the West Indies and Hawaii, Churchill returned permanently to Coronado in 1895 to purchase an eye-catching triangular lot in Coronado immediately across from the Hotel Del (today, a shopping complex and home to Vigilucci's and Dan McGeorge's Art Gallery).

Churchill could afford the services of one of California's leading architects, Irving Gill, who created a handsome home design in the popular Craftsman Shingle style. The 1308 Orange Avenue home was aligned for stunning views of the ocean with noteworthy protruding window bays, open porches, and a low-pitched roofline. Those in town remembered it for its rich cherry interiors and Churchill's extensive collection of oriental furnishings. It quickly became a center for social life in Coronado.

In October 1902, General Churchill unexpectedly fell unconscious and died, leaving his home to his niece, Mary Pratt, who soon married San Diego businessman Bernard McKenzie (the owner of Western Metals that survives today as part of Petco Park). Mary would die in 1912 and her husband a decade later and a developer bought the Churchill home with plans to demolish it to make room for a new hotel.

Fortune would smile on the distinguished house, though, sparing it from destruction at the last minute in a deal between the developer and Claus Spreckels, son of John D. Spreckels. In one of the most dramatic scenes in Coronado architectural history this gem of a home was lifted from its foundation and painstakingly moved. For three long weeks in 1928, the house crept slowly along Coronado streets,

first down Orange to B Avenue, then to Tenth Street, and then to Pomona.

Now comfortably established at 819 Pomona Avenue, the Churchill home became the site of Escuela del Coronado, a day and boarding school for small children, that “offered a real home atmosphere for the child as well as thorough training in school work and character building.”

Twin Coronado legacies have survived these many years to remind us of Mendell Churchill. First was the naming of Churchill Place (the street that ran next to his stunning home) in his honor. The second legacy involved the dramatic and unexpected act of conservation to save the home itself.

The tough and sturdy Churchill home, designed by a premier architect, has survived the years and still stands. Incredibly, the house was moved a second time, from Pomona Avenue to again stand on Orange Avenue – this time at the corner of Orange and Fourth Street.

Now with its third different address (1106 Fourth Street), the Churchill home was relocated in 1943 and converted into a 9-unit apartment building as part of the Home Use Program of World War II. Here it served as a boarding home for military families and war workers, the only home in Coronado converted under this Program.

A bit worse for wear, the home is again under careful renovation. Current owner Ann Keyser has plans to fix things up including returning many windows to their original wood style and renovating the famed Irving Gill interior stairwell. The work will convert nine apartments into seven small condos, specifically aimed to provide affordable living for younger people. “It’s a very important part of Coronado,” says Keyser, “and I’m glad I can be a part of its restoration.”

It’s hard to imagine a more difficult route for a significant Coronado legacy – from the red clay and antebellum mansions of Atlanta to a comfortable and refined Craftsman home in the shadow of the Hotel Del to, now, a historically designated building – twice moved – that

stands on Coronado's busiest street. More than anything, though, it certainly is a nice memento of past lives and Those Times in Coronado.

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