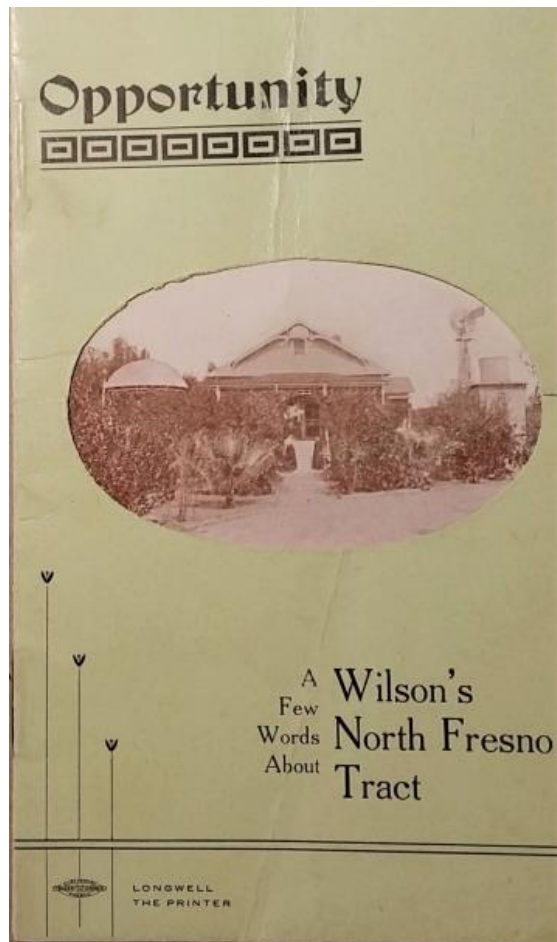


Wilson Island Stories of the early 1900s The George and Rosanna C. Wilson Estate at 831 E. Olive Avenue

The landowner's estate on Block 4

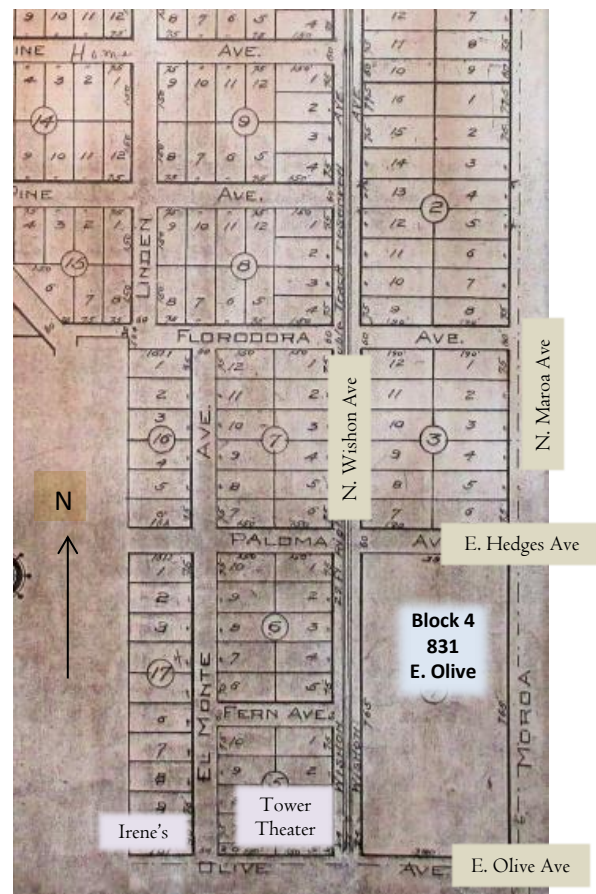
After arriving in Fresno in 1886, Rosanna and George Wilson built their first cottage in the 1890s on their 400-acre ranch between East Olive and McKinley Avenues, and east of today's Palm Avenue almost to Blackstone Avenue. Rosanna Cooper Wilson was the landowner and the visionary who created the Wilson Island. Their cottage would be featured on the front of the green advertising brochure for Rosanna's first subdivision filed in 1908 for the Wilson's North Fresno Tract which includes the Wilson Island.



Advertising brochure with photo of the Wilson's cottage.
Looking north at the front steps. Circa 1908

The entrance to the house faced south onto E. Olive Avenue. Visible to the left of the

house is the gazebo that George brought back from the Fresno County exhibit he managed at the 1893 Chicago World Exposition, and visible behind the gazebo are the tops of the eucalyptus trees that lined N. Wishon Avenue on the western border of their property. Their estate on Block 4 of the subdivision covered roughly seven acres, measuring 380' x 765,' equivalent to two city blocks today. It was bordered on the south by E. Olive Avenue, on the west by N. Wishon Avenue, on the east by N. Maroa Avenue (originally spelled Moroa) , and on the north by E. Hedges Avenue (originally Paloma Avenue).



The estate located on Block 4 of the Wilson's North Fresno Tract became 831 E. Olive Ave. It lies between N. Maroa (formerly Moroa) and N. Wishon; and ended on the north side at E. Hedges (formerly Paloma). Linden Ave. was formerly El Monte. Adapted from subdivision map of 1908.

Wilson Island Stories of the early 1900s
The George and Rosanna C. Wilson Estate at 831 E. Olive Avenue

At the time they built their cottage it was surrounded by a vast expanse of open plains dotted with an occasional farm house or vineyard, including one not far away owned by the Wilsons. Word had it that you could see all the way to the tree tops along the San Joaquin River to the north, a comfortable spot for an afternoon picnic.



A Wilson family picnic in the early 1900s. George and Rosanna on the right

The house at 831 E. Olive Ave. was far beyond what most folks considered the outskirts of town. Their mailing address was simply “the top of Forthcamp.” It would be several years before residential development would catch up with them. During that time, the small cottage was transformed into a three-story mansion that served as a stately anchor to the development of the Wilson’s North Fresno Tract.



South-facing three-story Wilson home at 831 E. Olive Ave. George Wilson with granddaughter Rosanna Katherine on steps. ca 1914

Rosanna oversaw lot sales and negotiated the deeds, taking a particular interest in the area that would become the Nob Hill of its day, the Wilson Island. George worked on getting a street car line installed between the new tract and downtown. Sitting on the cool granite front porch steps that faced south one could see the street cars coming north up Forthcamp Avenue (now N. Fulton Avenue) from downtown Fresno.

The grounds of their estate were filled with verbenas and other native plants, stone fruit trees, and citrus. In the rear was an abattoir for processing chickens. Chunks of hardpan lined paths and planters creating a garden which was considered lush and supplied abundant fresh roses for the living room.



Entry of 831 E. Olive Ave.



Living room of 831 E. Olive Ave.

Wilson Island Stories of the early 1900s The George and Rosanna C. Wilson Estate at 831 E. Olive Avenue

The first home in Rosanna's new residential tract was built in 1910 but construction slowed to a virtual stop over the next several years, interrupted by World War I efforts. As soon as the war ended in 1918, Rosanna and her son built one home in the Wilson Island, regenerating interest in her tract. The following year, in 1919, construction reached a fevered pitch which continued for the next decade. Their address "at the top of Forthcamp Avenue," the dead-end to the north of downtown, effectively marked the northern edge of town. However, that would soon change. As new homes sprung up beyond Olive, residential Fresno was moving north.

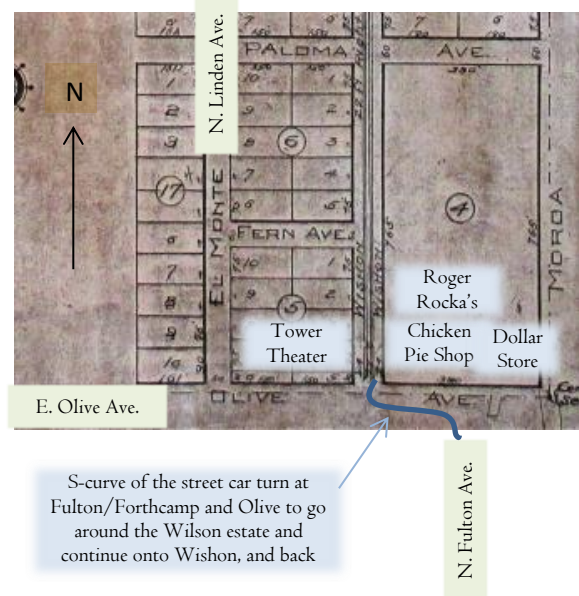
"The top of Forthcamp" eventually became 831 E. Olive Avenue. From her bedroom upstairs, Rosanna's granddaughter recalled hearing the trucks hauling bricks up Maroa in the evenings to the site of Fresno Normal School, likely for the auditorium still there today. Soon Fresno High School would move from downtown to the corner of Echo and McKinley Avenues. And other residential tracts would emerge around Fresno Normal School.

From her office on the first floor of her home, Rosanna conducted all of her business, collecting rents and loan payments that she stashed in a basket. Periodically she sent her grand-daughter to the bank to deposit often sizeable amounts of cash.

Eventually, the street car line up Fulton that ended at Olive needed to be extended north to McKinley. With the Wilson estate sitting squarely in its path, the line had to be routed around it. An S-turn onto Olive then Wishon solved the problem. However, the turn was too tight unless Olive could be widened a bit at that corner to allow for the turning radius of the street car. Rosanna agreed to make the necessary slice of her land available to the city. Vestiges of that widening can be seen today in the oddly wider sidewalk in front of the

Chicken Pie Shop (which sadly closed in April 2019).

The "S-curve" around the Wilson estate for the street car line



Looking west on Olive at Wishon.



Chicken Pie shop is on the left (north side of the street). The wide sidewalk in front of the Chicken Pie Shop used to be the widening in E. Olive Ave. for the north-bound street cars to turn west onto Olive, before continuing north onto Wishon.

2019

Rosanna was an astute businesswoman descended from generations of California land owners. Families who passed land holdings from one generation to the next. In the 1940s, she converted the north half of her estate to commercial properties by extending Fern Avenue one block east of Wishon, thereby splitting the estate on Block 4 in half.

Wilson Island Stories of the early 1900s
The George and Rosanna C. Wilson Estate at 831 E. Olive Avenue

It was an investment to create small lots that she passed on to her offspring.



Extending Fern a block east of Wishon in the 1940s created the 800 block on Fern. 2019

The Wilson mansion on E. Olive Avenue hosted family weddings as well as funerals, and was home for three generations of George and Rosanna's family. In 1942 it suffered a fire on the third floor and finally in about 1960 was torn down to make way for commercial establishments in what is today the heart of the Tower District. Familiar businesses that now occupy the old Block 4 estate include Roger Rocka's Dinner Theatre, the Chicken Pie Shop (until it closed in April 2019), the post office on Fern Avenue, the Dollar Store, and the old Bank of America building in addition to numerous small shops, restaurants and eateries. And across Wishon to the west is the well-known Tower Theatre.



Looking south at the corner of Hedges down Wishon toward Olive. This was the northwest corner the original Wilson estate. Tower Theater in the distance on right. 2019



Standing on Olive, looking south down Fulton toward downtown today. In 1908, from their front porch the Wilsons watched street cars traveling back and forth to downtown. 2019



Standing on Olive, looking north from Fulton. The driveway between the Chicken Pie Shop and the Dollar Store was the location of the main entrance to the Wilson estate. 2019

The sidewalks at the intersection of N. Fulton Avenue and E. Olive Avenue reveal another bit of history. In 1935, in the depths of the Great Depression, President Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration (WPA). It was an effort to create the infrastructure and employment opportunities to put about 8.5 million people to work. One of its public works projects is documented in the sidewalks along E. Olive Avenue across from the Wilson estate.



National WPA project imprint in the sidewalks at Olive and Fulton, and at other places along the street in that area. 2019.

Wilson Island Stories of the early 1900s
The George and Rosanna C. Wilson Estate at 831 E. Olive Avenue

If you are out for a neighborhood walk you might pause at the intersection of N. Fulton Avenue and E. Olive Avenue to look at the 1940 imprint of “WPA” in the sidewalks at the corners. There are several more along that stretch of Olive, and down Fulton. Imagine the entrance to the Wilson estate across the street with tall palms in the front yard partially blocking the view of the elegant three-story house.



2019

The intersection of E. Olive and N. Maroa Avenues, marks the southeast corner of Block 4 and the Wilson estate. A familiar landmark today is the old Lauck's Bakery building which houses a delightful Mexican bakery.

The Wilson Island that Rosanna C. Wilson envisioned and created was a short walk from her estate at 831 E. Olive Avenue. She paid close attention to construction in this neighborhood. She ensured that the minimal construction costs written into the deeds would create large homes with specific requirements for placement on the lots that allowed for expansive front yards. She and her son built one home in the historic district on N. Echo Avenue that she kept though never lived in. She remained her entire life in the home at the top of Forthcamp that she and George built on the estate they created. He had helped get the street car lines extended to their subdivision before his early death in 1915, and her son Albert Paulette had helped oversee construction of several other homes in the Wilson Island before leaving for Santa Cruz in the 1920s. Rosanna was the visionary who developed the Wilson Island into what it is today. Following Rosanna's death in 1947, the Wilson home remained on Olive for the

next 13 years until it gave way to the commercial development we see today. On May 18, 2019, the Wilson Island celebrates its centennial and recognizes the contributions of Rosanna Cooper Wilson as part of National Historic Preservation Month.

Sources include city directories, public records, and newspaper articles of the period. Photos of the Wilson home and family, and advertisements from the period are part of a private collection generously made available to the author.

Prepared by Jeannine Raymond, Ph.D.
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