

# Exploring Sarasota's Past

with the Historical Society of Sarasota County

## The Bidwell-Wood House

Alfred and Mary Bidwell built this home in 1882 on 80 acres Mary purchased from the State of Florida for a dollar an acre near the present-day intersection of U.S. 41-301 (Tamiami Trail) and Wood Street. Alfred Bidwell ran a store 1½ miles away at the bay on the sandy main street of early Sarasota (today's Cunliff Lane).

On Christmas Eve of 1884, the Bidwells held a party. While the women and children of the small settlement enjoyed the mild December air on the porch, inside a group of men spoke quietly of how Charles Abbe, tiny Sara Sota's first postmaster and a U.S. Commissioner, deserved to die. It was thought that Charles Abbe abetted land grabbers who sought to acquire the property of



settlers who had not properly filed homestead boundaries.

The murder was done on a Saturday afternoon two days after Christmas 1884 in front of Bidwell's store by a young man who'd fallen under the influence of Bidwell and others. Bidwell was associated with the Sara Sota Vigilante Committee. Mr. Bidwell was sentenced to death and the Bidwell property was sold in

1885. Bidwell's sentence was commuted a number of years later, but he never returned to Sarasota.

The house was purchased in 1895, along with 70 acres, by Annie and Luke Wood as a winter home. It was a 30 year anniversary present from Mrs. Wood. In 1931 twelve acres of the original tract were made available to the City as payment of taxes, Luke Wood Park being created from that parcel. The Woods,

**“...historical treasures of Sarasota; too dear to lose”**

then their surviving daughter Ethel, lived there until 1966.

During the Wood years, the land surrounding the property was lovingly cared for. A brooklet bubbled through a small ravine and the family added tropical plantings and a quaint foot bridge to reach town. The Woods welcomed neighbors with picnics, teas, and a crock full of cookies for the children. They delighted in providing a beauty spots for local artists to capture on paper and canvas.

## Crocker Memorial Church

Peter Crocker came to the Sara Sota area in 1873 with his wife Sophia. He purchased 20 acres southwest of Bay and Bee Ridge Roads.

Wishing to have a church, in 1901 Peter Crocker and two neighbors acquired two acres from the Florida Mortgage and Investment Company for the sum of one dollar. The deed states that the "...land is hereby granted solely for site of place of Divine Worship...and graveyard..." The church was named St. John's



Chapel Church but it was commonly known as "Crocker's church", incorporated as a Baptist chapel and served by traveling preachers. The grounds became one of Sarasota's earliest cemeteries, still visible just east of the northeast corner of Bee Ridge Road at Tamiami Trail.

Peter Crocker died in 1911 and his church gradually lost its congregation. In 1926 the Bay Haven Baptist

congregation moved the Church to Old Bradenton Road. Because there was no company capable of moving a whole building, the structure was dismantled and reconstructed piece by piece.

In 1984 the Historic Preservation Board of the City of Sarasota said that the structure "possesses integrity of workmanship and materials; exemplifies or reflects the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the City of Sarasota...; embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style or period."

## **New homes for Historic Buildings**

In the early 1970s the house was donated to the Sarasota County Historical Society and moved to land donated by the Sarasota County School Board where it became the first restoration project in Sarasota County.

In 1985, when the School Board requested return of the property, a local preservationist, Veronica Morgan, moved the house to her property across from Rosemary Cemetery, along with the Crocker Church which the Bay Haven Baptist congregation had outgrown.

During the 1990s the Throne of Grace Episcopal Charismatic Church utilized both house and church.

In 2004, the property on which both the house and the church sat was rezoned by the City for development. The Historical Society of Sarasota County, fearing demolition of both Crocker Memorial and the Bidwell-Wood house, presented a resolution to the City Commissioners stating that these structures “are historical treasures of Sarasota; too dear to lose”.

The buildings’ owners donated them to the Historical Society of Sarasota County requesting that the Society provide the Sarasota community a place to learn of its history. The Society's goals became 1) The acquisition of a safe place for the church and the house; 2) Historical restoration of both structures; 3) Opening the church and the house to the public which will afford Sarasota citizens and visitors opportunities to learn of Sarasota's history.

In 2006 the City approved a relocation to Pioneer Park. That same year the Historical Society of Sarasota County moved both buildings and began rehabilitation and restoration.

