

O'BRIEN HOUSE
136-138 North Roosevelt Avenue
Fresno
Fresno County
California

HABS No.CA-2882

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Building Survey
Pacific West Region
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

O'BRIEN HOUSE

HABS No. CA-2882

- Location:** 136-138 North Roosevelt Avenue
Fresno, Ca 93701
- Present Owner:** State of California, Department of Transportation (Caltrans) in 1992
- Present Use:** Residential duplex
- Significance:** The O'Brien House is significant for its association with working-class settlement patterns in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Fresno, and as a rare example of a vernacular house with very simplified Eastlake stylistic details.
- Historians:** Margo Nayyar, Research Associate, Division of Environmental Analysis, California Department of Transportation; John Snyder, Historical Architectural Specialty Branch Chief, Cultural Studies Office, Division of Environmental Analysis, California Department of Transportation. Completed May 2012.
- Project Information:** The O'Brien House recordation was completed as one of the mitigation measures for the Route 180 Freeway Extension project (Caltrans #06-Fre-180-R56.2/R58.4), and was prepared as stipulated in the Memorandum of Agreement submitted to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended. Photographs were taken by Don Tateishi in March 1992. The O'Brien House was determined eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places on May 2, 1991 through consensus determination between the Federal Highway Administration and the California State Historic Preservation Officer. It is also listed in the California Register of Historical Resources.

Part I. Historical Information

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: ca. 1892

The land was purchased in December 1890, but was first listed in the 1892-93 Fresno City Directory as being located at "West Avenue near San Joaquin."¹

2. Architect: Unknown

3. Original owner: Maurice O'Brien

Little is known about the O'Brien family. Maurice O'Brien purchased lots 12, 13 and 14 in the Kroeger Addition of Fresno in December 1890. Maurice and six of his family members, Albert, John, Thomas, Walter, William and Stella, moved to and from Fresno sporadically throughout the 1890s. No information was found indentifying the relationship between the six O'Brien's, because they never retained strong roots in Fresno.

The 1892 Fresno Voter Register provides useful information for identifying O'Brien family relationships. Maurice is noted to be forty-seven years old and to have been born in Ontario, Canada. He was naturalized as a United States citizen on January 2, 1891 at the Fresno County Superior Court.² Also, on the 1892 Voter Register is a Thomas (age 27) and Morgan Joseph (age 24) O'Brien, both of whom were from Canada and were naturalized, "by virtue of naturalization of father."³ Maurice may have been the father, or an older brother, of Thomas and Morgan Joseph, however, no additional information was located to verify this; furthermore, Morgan Joseph disappears from records and is not associated with the 136-138 North Roosevelt house.

O'Brien family members moved to Fresno at different times during the 1890s and changed jobs frequently. Walter O'Brien was the first O'Brien listed in the 1891 Fresno City Directory. Between 1891 and 1896, he claimed to be a master carpenter, a clerk, and a laborer for the Southern Pacific Company. In 1898, Walter moved, and in 1900 he returned to Fresno and was listed as a miner. From 1892 to 1900, he was associated with the property at 136-138 North Roosevelt Avenue.

John O'Brien was listed as a carpenter from 1892 to 1896, and was then listed as a laborer for the Southern Pacific Company until 1898. Similarly, Thomas O'Brien, a carpenter, moved into the family residence in 1894. In 1896, he was a laborer for the

¹ Fresno City Directory 1892-93.

² Ancestry.com. *California, Voter Registers, 1866-1898* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011. Original data: Great Registers, 1866-1898. Microfilm, 185 rolls, California State Library, Sacramento, California.

³ Ancestry.com. *California, Voter Registers, 1866-1898* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

Southern Pacific Company, and in 1898, he was again a carpenter. Both John and Thomas were no longer associated with the O'Brien property after 1898.⁴

Albert and William O'Brien were the last members to move to Fresno in 1896. William was a shoemaker and lived at the O'Brien house until 1900. Albert stayed only a year at the house. Maurice O'Brien was the only family member that remained a carpenter and was continually associated with the O'Brien House from 1892 to 1900. Stella was a homemaker until 1900 when the remaining O'Brien family had a mass exodus from Fresno.⁵

From 1900 to 1922, the 136-138 North Roosevelt house was associated with a series of blue-collar residents; the house maintained high turnover. James Anton was a longtime resident from ca. 1900 to 1913; he was a carpenter, Standard Oil Company driver, and warehouseman for Lyman D. Hoppock. It is possible that the O'Brien house was a boarding house for the Standard Oil Company until ca. 1912 because many of its residents worked for Standard Oil, until the Union Oil Company purchased and expanded the warehouse in 1910-12.⁶

Between 1923 and 1927, the house was listed as vacant. But in 1927, Thomas O'Brien reappears as a resident in half of the duplex. Likely, the O'Brien family continuously owned the house, but rented out the apartments.

4. Builder, contractor: Maurice O'Brien

Maurice O'Brien, as a carpenter, would have likely built the house himself. At the time of this survey, there was no information found to suggest that O'Brien hired another builder or contractor.

5. Original plans and construction: The original appearance of the house is primarily intact today. The architectural features and layout of the property are as they were ca. 1892. According to the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps from 1890-1943, the structure of the house has remained the same. A porch was added ca. 1910-18, and a kitchen was added at an unknown date.

6. Alterations and additions:

The frontage street's name was changed three times from Cemetery Avenue, to West Avenue, and lastly, to Roosevelt Avenue. The first description of the O'Brien house location was cited in the 1892-93 Fresno City Directory as "West and Neilsen Aves." The house was built in the northeast corner of West and Nielsen Avenues and changed street numbers three times from 128 West Avenue, to 264 West Avenue, to 164 Roosevelt, and after a ca. 1918 short distance move, 136-138 North Roosevelt Avenue.

⁴ Fresno City Directories, 1892- 1900.

⁵ Fresno City Directories, 1892- 1900.

⁶ Fresno City Directories, 1900-1927.

The O'Brien House was moved from its original location to its current location at 136-138 North Roosevelt. The Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of 1918/19 confirm the removal of the structure from 164 North Roosevelt to 136-138 North Roosevelt. The move affected the house in three ways: one, the interior chimney was damaged; two, the foundation was altered; and three, a porch was added to the primary façade.

The interior chimney damage is visible above the roof line. The foundation is now brick foundation sills, which were not used during the time period the house was originally built. Brick foundation sills were used in Fresno from 1900 to 1920 in working class houses.

Lastly, the Sanborn Maps of 1918/19 display a paste-over for the front porch addition. Porch renovations likely occurred at the 136-138 North Roosevelt site. The full-width porch was added to the primary (west) façade between 1910-18. The porch was designed with late Colonial Revival characteristics including four symmetrically placed, plain, round, thickly proportioned wood Tuscan order columns, evocative of the last years of the revival. The porch was adapted to the typical Eastlake offset entry.

The original exterior wood staircase on the south façade was replaced with the current wood staircase at an unknown date. Furthermore, a one-story kitchen addition on the east façade was constructed at an unknown date; the addition is offset to the south. The addition also has a small room to the north of the kitchen.

B. Historical Context

Fresno incorporated as a city in 1885 and quickly expanded north of its city limits. The first suburban neighborhoods were designed for the working class starting in 1880. The Griffith's Addition (1880) and Griffith's Second Addition (1884) were the first two neighborhoods platted in dense, narrow lots meant for modest working-class houses. Following the platting of the Griffith's Additions were the Park (1885), Forthcamp (1886), Elm Grove (1887), Central (1887) and Kroeger Additions (1888). All of the additions, except for the Park Addition, were intended for modest dwellings.⁷

Running north-south, Kroeger's Addition consists of ninety narrow parcels. On December 22, 1890, Maurice O'Brien purchased lot 12 in Kroeger's Addition of Fresno, from C.L. Foin. He also purchased the adjoining two lots, lots 13 and 14, from Frederic A. Foin. He paid a total of \$609 in gold coin for the three parcels. Each lot measured 25 feet wide by 144 feet deep. There was absolutely no development in the entire addition before the O'Brien's purchase, allowing O'Brien to combine the three lots and set a precedent for a less dense land usage.

⁷ Andrea Galvin, "City of Fresno North Park Survey: Historic Context & Survey," (Galvin Preservation Associates Inc., Redondo Beach, California, November 2008), 1-115; Bole's North Park, County of Fresno, RS Book 2, Map 51, February 1903 (accessed at Fresno County Recorder's Office); Forthcamp's Addition No. 2, County of Fresno, December 1908 (accessed at Fresno County Recorder's Office); North Park, RS Book 2, County of Fresno, Map 14, January 18, 1902 (accessed at Fresno County Recorder's Office); North Park Extension, County of Fresno, Plat Book 2, Map 26, June 19, 1902 (accessed at Fresno County Recorder's Office).

Kroeger's Addition served blue-collar families who worked in the nearby industrialized areas. Prior to 1888, the area was rural, but in the 1890s the Southern Pacific Railroad built a nearby railroad station and the Standard Oil Company opened its twelfth west coast warehouse facility (1890). These two industrial companies brought blue-collar jobs to Fresno and created a need for more working-class housing. Many of the residents in the Kroeger Addition worked for Southern Pacific and Standard Oil. The Addition also housed residents working as carpenters, hardware men, firemen, butchers, blacksmiths, and other various laborer positions.⁸

During the 1890s very little residential construction occurred, however:

A boarding house neighborhood...developed near the junction of H Street, and Roosevelt and Voorman avenues. Employees working at the Standard Oil warehouse resided within this area during the 1890s. It appears that the multi family residence at 136-138 North Roosevelt is an example of the type of buildings that would have comprised the boarding house neighborhood.⁹

By 1918, most of the residences within the Kroeger Addition were single family houses.

The O'Brien House is an extremely rare example of a carpenter-built residence that occupied the blue-collar, platted outskirts area of early Fresno. The structure's association with the existing Standard Oil Warehouse (1890) adds further historic significance as a company-sponsored boarding house for the years 1900-10. Almost all original worker housing in the lower Kroeger's Addition is now gone. The O'Brien house remains one of very few working class dwellings in Fresno.

Part II. Architectural Information

A. General Statement

- 1. Architectural Character:** The O'Brien House is rare example of a vernacular residence with very simplified Eastlake stylistic details; this type of late-nineteenth-century working-class vernacular residence seldom survives in Fresno. Details include Eastlake windows, simple window surrounds, jigsaw-cut scrollwork and a flattened jigsaw-cut, spoke-and-wheel motif in the peak of the main façade's gable end.

The O'Brien House was the first house built in the Kroeger Addition of Fresno and was most likely built as a boarding house for the working-class. The house served as a company sponsored boarding house, used by companies such as the Standard Oil Company. The house is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A as associated with the broader settlement patterns of working-class Fresno before and immediately following the turn of the 20th century. It is also eligible under Criterion C through its embodiment of the distinctive characteristics of a type, period and

⁸ Galvin, "City of Fresno North Park Survey," 47-48

⁹ Galvin, "City of Fresno North Park Survey," 48.

method of construction. The house was moved before 1920, but due to the near proximity of the second site, all of the original historical association have been maintained and can be interpreted today. Although original landscaping does not exist, the house itself offers a high degree of architectural integrity, illustrating carpenter-interpreted design motifs common for structures of the very early 1890s.

- 2. Condition of fabric:** The condition of the O'Brien House is fair. The architectural integrity of the house is good; however, the overall upkeep of the house has been neglected.

B. Description of Exterior

- 1. Overall dimensions:** The two-story, symmetrical O'Brien House has a simple rectangular plan, two bays wide and three bays deep. Overall proportions for the structure are tall and narrow, indicative of very high ceilinged interior spaces.
- 2. Foundation:** The house has a pier-and-beam foundation with brick sill.
- 3. Walls:** The exterior of the house is clad with rustic wood channel siding. Also used are plain, narrow wooden end boards. A wide frieze, with closely-spaced, flat, jigsaw-cut scrollwork and flattened jigsaw-cut spoke-and-wheel motif, is displayed in the gable end of the primary (west) façade.
- 4. Structural system, framing:** Wood-frame
- 5. Porch, balcony:** The late-Colonial-Revival style front porch was added between 1910 and 1918, and is a one-story, full-width porch on the primary (west) façade. Colonial Revival characteristics include four symmetrically-placed, wooden Tuscan order columns. They support a low-pitched, half-hipped roof, with boxed eaves and plain frieze. The roof has composite shingles. The porch was adapted to the typical Eastlake offset entry (a Colonial Revival structure from 1910-18 would have had a centered entry). The porch addition accommodates the original window placement for both the first- and second-story windows. The wood railing is composed of simple square balusters and plain handrail, common to Colonial Revival porches.

There is a small staircase and balcony on the south façade that is used as the entryway to the second-story apartment. The exterior staircase and balcony are made of simple wood boards.

- 6. Chimney:** There is one interior, brick chimney located on the north slope of the roof, at the rear (east) end of the house.
- 7. Openings**
 - a. Doors:** The primary entrance is located on the north side of the west façade and is offset from the center of the house. The door's design features are indistinguishable because it is blocked by a metal screen security door. The wood door surround has

minimal Eastlake details, including plain trim on the upper half, ribbed trim on the lower half with decorative buttoned knobs at the meeting rail. The decorative upper transom is obscured by metal security bars.

The secondary entrance on the west end of the south façade also is obscured by a metal security screen door. The door has a plain paneled wood surround with no decorative trim. The decorative transom is now boarded up.

The primary and secondary entrances are indicative of the building's original multi-family use. Likely, the O'Brien family built the house with privacy and independence for the extended adult family, or with the intent of boarders.

- b. Windows:** On the second story of the west façade at the north end, there is one single, Eastlake (elongated, one-over-one-light double-hung) window. At the south end of the second story there are paired Eastlake windows. Directly below, on the first story, are matching paired Eastlake windows. The first-story windows have metal security bars on the bottom sashes. The window surrounds match the door surrounds with plain trim on the upper half, ribbed trim on the lower half and decorative buttoned knobs at the meeting rail. However, the ribbed trim is missing from the second-story windows due to deterioration, and the single, second-story window is missing the decorative knobs and ribbing completely. In the front gable end there is a small, multi-light, decorative window that has been painted over. It has a decorative wood surround and sill.

The north façade has six (four on the second story, two on the first story) Eastlake windows with simple wood surrounds and sills. On the first story, there is one smaller one-over-one-light double-hung window. The first-story windows have metal security bars on the bottom sashes, and the smaller window is fully covered by security bars. There is a small, one-over-one-light, sliding window on the north façade of the kitchen addition at the rear (east) end of the house.

Fenestration on the south façade of the house is similar to that on the north façade. Two second-story Eastlake windows and a door are spaced evenly along the façade. The first story has two Eastlake windows. One window is boarded up; the other has metal security bars on the bottom sash. All windows have simple wood surrounds and sills without decoration.

8. Roof

- a. Shape, covering:** The front gabled roof is moderately pitched, with wood framing and composite shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves:** The primary (west) façade has a bracketed cornice in the gable end, with a wide fascia and decorated scrolled brackets evenly spaced along the façade. The side and rear façades have simple slightly-overhanging eaves with a plain fascia.

- c. **Dormers, towers:** No dormers, towers, or cupolas are present on the O'Brien house.

C. Description of Interior

The interior was not accessible; therefore, no interior information could be gathered for the O'Brien House.

D. Site

1. **Historic Landscape design:** No historic landscaping is associated with the dwelling.
2. **Outbuildings:** No historic outbuildings are on site.

Before the house was moved, a combined one- and two-story wood-frame outbuilding sat on the southeast corner of the original 164 North Roosevelt Avenue site. This structure most likely functioned as a carpentry shop for the O'Briens. It appears to have been demolished during the move to the current location at 136-138 North Roosevelt Avenue. Sanborn Fire Insurance maps show two, two-story dwellings located at 136-138 North Roosevelt Avenue as of 1918-19, one of which may have been a garage. The garage no longer exists.

Part III. Sources

Ancestry.com. *California, Voter Registers, 1866-1898* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA:

Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011. Original data: Great Registers, 1866-1898. Microfilm, 185 rolls, California State Library, Sacramento, California.

Central Addition (1887); Griffith's Villa Addition (1884); Griffith's Addition and Griffith's Second Addition (1884); Park Addition (1885/87); Forthcamp's Addition (1886); Elm Grove Addition and Elm Grove Supplement (1887); Cheek's Sunflower Addition (1887); Griffith's Sunflower Addition (1887); Muller & Northcraft Addition (1888); and the Yosemite Addition (1888): County of Fresno. (Fresno County Recorder's Office).

Fresno City Directories. 1891-94, 1896, 1898, 1900-01, 1913-1929.

Galvin, Andrea. "City of Fresno North Park Survey: Historic Context & Survey." Galvin Preservation Associates Inc. Redondo Beach, California, November 2008.

Kroeger's Addition, Plat Book 1, County of Fresno, Map No. 51, January 10, 1888. (Fresno County Recorder's Office).

O'Brien family deed transactions, Official Record Books, County of Fresno, miscellaneous entries between 1891 and 1912. [Noting the transfer of outlying agricultural property near Malaga.]

O'Brien, Maurice, from C.L. Foin. Deed recorded in Official Record Book No. 121, County of Fresno, December 22, 1890, p.166.

O'Brien, Maurice, from Frederic A. Foin. Deed recorded in Official Record Book No. 121, County of Fresno, December 22, 1890, p.167.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Fresno, 1918-19 and 1948. [Earlier Sanborn maps exist for Fresno in 1884, 1888, and 1906, but these do not show this then-outlying area. The Standard Oil Company warehouse is schematically shown in 1906, but with no vicinity detail. Two sets of original 1918-19 volumes for Fresno exist in the Map Room at the California State University, Fresno. These are especially enlightening with regards to later pasted-over changes.]

Weitze, Karen J., and Lori Lilburn, Dames & Moore, field survey, November 1-14. 1990.

White, Gerald T. Formative Years in the Far West. A History of Standard Oil Company of California and Predecessors Through 1919. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962.