A Brief History of The Uplands Mansion
Crystal Springs Uplands School is very grateful to the Crocker family and to our many friends whose thoughtful donations helped secure this building and the surrounding acreage.

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In the early days of the Spanish territory called *Alta California*, most of the settled land was divided between the missions and immense land grants, or ranchos. Originally granted by the King of Spain, the majority of these inexactily surveyed parcels were reconfirmed to their original grant holding families when Mexico took over the governing of California in 1835. Because the economy of the territory was based on cattle, these properties often covered hundreds of square miles. The acreage on which Crystal Springs Uplands School now resides was once the northern most part of such a land grant, then called *Rancho de las Pulgas* (Ranch of the Fleas).

In the spring of 1853, shortly after California joined the Union, the W.D.M. Howard family purchased most of the local Rancho San Mateo plus a 160-acre tract of Rancho de las Pulgas. Known as Uplands, because of its hilly aspect, the Howards deemed this part of their new estate to be an excellent home site. They erected two houses on the site over a twenty-five year period. The first was a relatively modest structure, the second a four-story, 36-room mansion constructed in 1878 and named Uplands after the hill on which it sat. Some years later, the house and the surrounding acreage were sold to Charles F. Crocker, whose father had amassed a fortune as a member of the “Big Four” builders of the Central Pacific Railroad. Crocker died the same year he purchased Uplands. Although his wife had predeceased him, his children continued to live in their new home with their maternal grandmother. The grounds were a perfect place for children to grow up, since they included an orchard, chicken houses, a dairy, a stable and greenhouses as well as elaborate formal gardens. Upon her marriage, C.F. Crocker’s daughter, Jennie Crocker Henderson, sold her share of Uplands to her brother, Charles Templeton Crocker.
From the front entrance - 1915 and today
In 1911, Templeton Crocker decided that he wanted to build his own house on the site as a wedding present for his bride, C & H sugar heiress Helene Irwin. In order to do so, he had to move the existing house. The job was awarded to a local contractor who was promised that if he could move the house without damaging it, then he could have it. Using sleds and pulleys, the house was slipped cautiously down the hill, across the creek, and settled on a new foundation on El Cerrito Avenue, facing Poett Rd., a remarkable feat of engineering even by today’s standards. This accomplished, Crocker commissioned renowned San Francisco architect Willis Polk to design a home in the style of a “Neo-Classical Renaissance palazzo.” Then he and Polk set out on a buying foray to Europe, furnishing the mansion with French, Italian and Spanish artifacts and hiring German craftsmen.

Built at a cost of $1.6 million (more than $45 million when adjusted for inflation), the mansion Polk designed for Crocker contained 35,000 square feet of living space, a 10,000 square foot basement, and 39 rooms, including 12 bedrooms and 12 baths. It also featured a large wine cellar, elevator, dumbwaiter, four staircases and mezzanine level living quarters for ten ser-
vants. The resulting mansion is not immense, but its interior of matching marble walls, silk wall coverings, Italian ironwork and finely crafted German woodcarving make it, according to local architectural experts, “unsurpassed by any other mansion in San Mateo County.”

This new Uplands was built using materials of the best quality and, as often as possible, of European origin. Some parts of the old Howard/Crocker house were used in the foundations. The marble floors of the loggias, for example, were taken from the old house. The new mansion was constructed using steel-reinforced concrete. The eight exterior columns were to have been Carrara marble, as was the sixteen-foot library fireplace, but World War I and U-boat warfare made it impossible to import most materials after 1914. The plans were changed and each column was cast in one piece of concrete. The exterior of the house, originally planned to be terra cotta, was redesigned in cement plaster made from Portland cement and Santa Cruz sand. The exterior ornamentation was made of cast concrete.

Artisans were imported to install the fittings and appointments, which had been purchased in Europe. The Carrara marble fireplaces were hand-carved. All the marble mantelpieces came from the same 16th century Spanish castle.
The drawing room (now the library Reference Room) has 18th century French sconces and trim. The library (now the Fiction Room) originally had hand-woven French silk wall covering, designed especially for the mansion and executed in Marseilles. Unfortunately this had to be taken down in 1984 when age and water damage left it ruined. The colors of the wall covering, rose and Pomona green, were repeated throughout the public rooms of the house. If one looks at the Italianate ceiling of the Grand Hallway, this color scheme is still visible. The ceiling and doors of the ladies’ powder room (now Mirror Room) reflect this color scheme as well in their rare Chinese pilamont design.

The interior of the mansion was designed to resemble an Italian Renaissance palazzo. The painted ceiling of the Grand Hallway and its heavy ironwork hall sconces wrapped in green velvet reflect this. These sconces sit in fixtures which, before being wired for electricity, would have allowed the sconces to be taken down and used as torches. The late 16th century ballroom ceiling, which was purchased in northern Italy and reassembled here, carries on the Renaissance theme. The gallery around the ballroom, with its many arches and rosettes, is
THE MANSION

NOW & THEN

(Servants' living quarters were on the mezzanine directly above dining room)
Mrs. Crocker's sitting room
Mrs. Crocker's dressing room
Mrs. Crocker's bedroom
Mr. Crocker's bedroom

remaining rooms were for guests

THIRD FLOOR
typical of a Renaissance palazzo. When dances were held in what the Crockers called “the Garden Court,” musicians could play from the gallery unseen and a young Juliet could sneak a first glance at her Romeo in an environment which must have seemed very much like that of the medieval Capulets, although the hemlines were much shorter!

The floors of the mansion are eastern American oak and were all hand-polished regularly with beeswax. This same oak was used for carving the library’s bookcases. The woodwork in the Gothic smoking room (now the head of school’s office) is of intricately carved Italian chestnut. Chevrons on the columns represent printer’s symbols from the earliest days of the printed book. The stone hearth is from Cannes. If one looks closely at the beams above the Italian ironwork chandelier, however, one will discover that they are concrete, plastered and painted to simulate wood. Carved into the newel post of the little staircase which leads to the balcony in this room are numerous insects and even a worm. The leaded glass windows of the room, and the main door to it, graced the same northern Italian palazzo as did the ballroom ceiling. Above the massive door of this room, which was used by Mr. Crocker as a study, is a Latin inscription from Seneca: “Leisure without learning is death.”
The dining room, now the Conference Room, possesses golden-hued split marble wall panels imported from Italy. The doors of this room are of 17th century French design. On the back of the dining room fireplace is a lovely classical motif: a *bas relief* of Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth, pouring a libation to bless the house. The ceiling of this room was carved especially for the house and took four years to complete. The sconces on these walls are from a 17th century Loire Valley chateau. Most of the bedroom sconces were purchased at this same chateau. All were electrified when they were installed in the mansion.
The Frances Beard Room adjoining the dining room (currently a classroom) and the Folger Room of the library were originally open air porches, called loggias. They were enclosed in 1982 to provide more space for the school without destroying the architectural harmony of the building. Huge concrete planters decorated with plaster fruit and flowers, like the ones still to be found on either side of the Folger Room doors, once filled the openings where window seats are seen today.

The mansion was completed in 1917. A gala party for dozens of San Francisco society members marked the opening. For ten years the Crockers entertained lavishly several weekends of every month. Tea dances on the patio and formal balls in the Garden Court were frequent. Tennis, swimming and riding were available for daytime activities. Dinners were held at the huge dining room table followed by cigars for the gentlemen in the smoking room and tea for the ladies in the drawing room. Guests came by train and were met at the San Mateo station by chauffeured cars from Uplands. Nine guest bedrooms, a trunk room and linen rooms on each floor made staying at Uplands a pleasure.

The Crockers were, unfortunately, divorced in 1927, and the house was thereafter occupied by Mr. Crocker only periodically,
as a “summer cottage” and “hunting lodge.” He moved his main residence to an apartment on Green Street and began to devote most of his time to theatrical productions and scientific expeditions, which he underwrote. He also helped found the California Historical Society. Nevertheless, according to family members, holidays were frequently held in the house throughout the 1930s.

In 1942, Crocker sold the property to Romie C. Jacks. Although Mr. Jacks died shortly after moving into the house, Mrs. Jacks continued to live in a few rooms on the second floor for almost a decade, attended by 13 servants. In 1951, she rented the house to the Soviet delegation to the Japanese Peace Conference, then being held in San Francisco. The Russian consulate oversaw extensive cleaning and refurbishing before the ambassadorial party moved in. Local residents were astonished - and perhaps uneasy - to discover Ambassador Andrei Gromyko and his party in their midst.

For several years thereafter the house was unoccupied and most of the acreage was quietly sold for subdividing. The original gateposts of the estate can still be seen at the foot of Uplands Drive and Stonehedge. In 1956, the Crocker family reacquired Uplands, after a prospective buyer was unable to raise the $95,000 asking price. In March of that year, with the
The Ballroom is used occasionally for events, but also used for quiet study.
help of Mrs. Jennie Crocker Henderson and the blessing of the San Mateo County Historical Society, the Trustees of Crystal Springs School purchased the mansion and 10 acres of surrounding land to be the school’s permanent home. Today, it serves as the focal point for a campus community of 350 students in grades six through twelve. Templeton Crocker, that *bon vivant* patron of the arts and sciences, would probably be well pleased with his mansion’s second life.