



The Cupola

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Pardee Home Museum

DECEMBER 2003

Oakland City
Landmark 1975

National Register of
Historic Places 1976

California Historic
Landmark 1998

Book reading by Ishmael Reed highlights holiday season at the Pardee Home

Renowned Oakland author Ishmael Reed attracted a capacity crowd to the front parlor of the Pardee Home on the very rainy Sunday afternoon of November 30th. Reed read from and signed copies of his acclaimed new work, *Blues City: A Walk in Oakland*. One of the most prolific African-American writers in the U.S., Reed, "traveled" around his hometown (which Oakland has been since 1979) and visited historic sites, street fairs, and other attractions he might have previously missed to produce this meditation upon our city's past, present, and future.

Reed generously devoted over five pages of his work to a summary of his guided tour of the Pardee Home. In the book, Reed concludes his tour of our museum by noting that, "There is something poignant about touring a house where two sisters, survivors of celebrations and tragedies, lived until 1981. In the old Oakland you might have acquired wealth and objects from all over the world, but your children and wives died early; no amount of money could buy off tuberculosis, diphtheria, and typhoid."

Reed offered spirited readings of a number of highlights from *Blues City*, and afterwards guests lingered to purchase books, have them signed and enjoy the delicious cakes donated by Pardee Home volunteer Vern Horner in the dining room.



David Nicolai

Holding his book, Ishmael Reed talks with attendees of his reading on Nov. 30.



David Nicolai

A bonus for guests, the holiday tree at the Pardee Home was decorated with paper poppies to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the state flower. At right is the tree in the dining room; at top is a detail of the poppy decorations, handmade by volunteer Gloria Pieretti.





One hundred years ago

October - December, 1903

"BIG-HEARTED" GOVERNOR PARDEE

Although the *Sacramento Bee* took a critical line on Pardee's response to the plight of Folsom prisoners, a different perspective on Pardee's concern for state inmates appeared in an earlier *Los Angeles Times* editorial, reprinted in the *Oakland Enquirer* on February 21, 1903, under the headline, "Big-Hearted Governor":

The innate kindness of Gov. Pardee is shown in what he has been doing this week, often to the exclusion of other business, his purpose being to cheer the hearts of some unfortunate who may be the inmate of some of the institutions of the State. Since he was inducted into office, the Governor has been in receipt of scores of letters from the inmates of the insane asylums of the State and other kindred institutions, beseeching him to set them at liberty. Some of the letters are well written, for because a man or woman has lost their reason, it does not often dull their mental faculties in every direction, and from persons who are otherwise considered mentally dull have come letters in which a brilliancy of mind in that one direction is indicated.

Some of the epistles are pitiful in the extreme, and the poor unfortunates seek to pour into the ear of the Executive their tales of woe or their manias, but usually they all have the same tenor, in that they conclude with an appeal to him to bring about their release. To grant such requests is, of course, out of all question, but the Governor has been informed that those who occupy the insane asylums, particularly, are oftentimes cheered by the receipt of letters. It makes no difference to them from whom the letters are received, even if from ordinary individuals; they serve to break the monotony of the living death which the poor unfortunates suffer, but to receive a letter from the Chief Executive of the State, in which he expresses sympathy for them - for many of them realize their condition - is to receive something which many of them prize more than anything else which they may possess.

Knowing this, Gov. Pardee had devoted such time as was necessary to answering the appeals made to him. He does not send a stereotyped letter, written by some amanuensis, but in his own bold, legible hand, he has sent scores of personal letters to those who have written to him. How much of joy; how much of satisfaction and elation; how much of sunshine these letters have caused to those receiving them, can never be known, but the act shows the character of the Governor, and a man who will stop during a busy session of the Legislature.

The Pardee family moves into the mansion

During the final three months of his first year in office, Governor Pardee had to wrestle with two related issues which were to vex him throughout his term - conditions in the state's two prisons and, likewise, those in the state's mental hospitals. Problems within the prisons had actually come to the fore in the summer of 1903, with a violent prison break by thirteen inmates at Folsom on July 27th. The convicts were captured a month later after a dramatic manhunt which resulted in the deaths of two of the inmates, two guards, and four citizens. The State Board of Prison Directors released its report on the incident on September 28th, and Governor Pardee issued his response to that report the same date.

The directors criticized top prison officials for their willingness to obey the convicts' orders not to shoot at the escaping inmates; called for more prison cells to be constructed so that Folsom could abandon the "congregate" system, in which young and new offenders are housed together with older, veteran prisoners - a system abandoned by virtually every other state because of its certainty to "educate criminals"; and called for a thorough reorganization of the prison force. In his response to the report, Governor Pardee approved the Board's recommendations for improvements at Folsom, congratulated the directors for their expressed intention to exclude politics from prison management, and expressed his confidence in their ability "to conduct the prisons in the right way," according to the *Enquirer*. He did, however, acknowledge that during the break-out, the "thoroughly demoralized" prison staff displayed a "total want of capacity and efficiency."

Pardee also endorsed the prison directors' condemnation of the "sickly sentimentality" which prompted many in the Legislature and the public to side with convicts over prison officials, and he wrote that "Those who come closest in contact with the convicts in our prisons know best how to manage them." These words brought forth the wrath of the editorial writers at the *Sacramento Bee*, who, on October 3, condemned Pardee for ignoring the "cruelty, brutality, filth, inhumanity, and torture involved in the use of the strait-jacket in California prisons," as disclosed by a recent legislative investigation.

