



PARDEE HOME MUSEUM NEWSLETTER

National Register of
Historic Places

Oakland City Landmark

Fall 1997

Jacob Soares: Messenger to Governor George Pardee



**“Soares
was a
man of
dignity
and
stature”**

In the earliest years of the twentieth century, government at all levels operated on a simpler, more personal basis than today. When George Pardee began his tenure as Governor of California in 1903, for example, he did so with a total staff of four men - two secretaries, a stenographer, and a messenger. A. B. Nye, editor of the influential *Oakland Inquirer* and perhaps Pardee's closest political confidant, served as the Governor's personal secretary; J. Arthur Elston, a young Berkeley lawyer, served as his executive secretary; Edward G. Twogood of Woodville was Pardee's stenographer, and Jacob Soares, the subject of this profile, worked as the Governor's messenger.

Soares was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1850. His father Samuel had been born in Portugal, possibly of Sephardic Jewish descent, and his mother Mare Rickets had been born in the West Indies. Jacob emigrated to the United States as a young man and eventually went into business in San Francisco with one August Davis. On February 28, 1880, these two proprietors took out an ad in the San Francisco *Pacific Appeal* which read “Elite Tonsorial Palace on New Montgomery Street. Three first-class artists always in attendance. Shaving, shampooing and hair cutting done with neatness and dispatch. In 1888 Soares wrote a letter to the editor of the

Pacific Appeal, complaining how his reputation was being harmed through some misunderstanding of his allegiance to the Republican party. Written at a time when the vast majority of African-American voters in California and throughout the nation maintained rather strict allegiance to the “Grand Ol’ Party” of Abraham Lincoln, this letter may well have been one of Soares' first forays into politics.

By the mid 1890's Jacob was involved in the Afro-American Congress in Los Angeles and in 1898 he worked to gain the support of black voters in Los Angeles for the successful Republican gubernatorial campaign of Los Angeles lawyer Henry Gage. It was Governor Gage who first appointed Soares as his messenger, a position he continued to hold under the successive administrations of Governors Pardee and James Gillette.

One of the most interesting aspects of Soares' many years of service in Sacramento is exactly what duties were entailed in serving as the Governor's messenger. According to Jack Surmani, a former interpreter at the Capitol State Museum, he played a “unique role...he handled mail, routed papers, sealed governors' papers with the official seal, and maintained a press scrapbook.” Helen Pardee, the Governor's youngest daughter, recalled late in her life that Soares had kept press scrapbooks for both Gage and Pardee, and he had asked Pardee if he “wished to have only favorable reports pasted in there like he had done with Gage, and he [Pardee] told Jacob to put in both [positive and negative accounts of his performance as governor].” This recollection is certainly in keeping with the respective historical reputations of these two governors - Gage being remembered today as an “exceedingly dictatorial, foolishly petulant, bitterly partisan, and very unreasonable” leader, while Pardee is widely acknowledged to be one of the most reform-minded Governors of this century, famous for his “open door” administrative style and his emphasis on building productive bipartisan relationships between Republicans and Democrats in Sacramento.

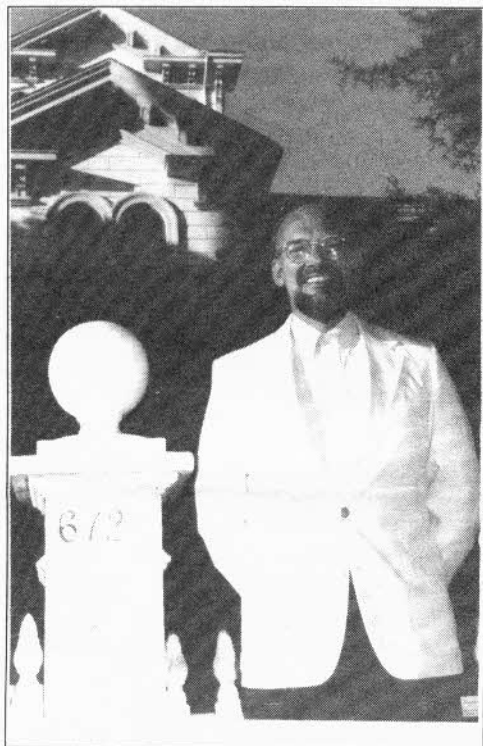
Soares also served in trusted support functions where needed, even as a valet to President Theodore Roosevelt when he visited the Pardees at the Governor's Mansion during his renowned 1903 tour of California. Jacob's family was also involved, as his wife Ella (Jacob's third wife out of four - he outlived his first three wives) and two of his older sons worked there doing housekeeping chores. According to Vito Sgromo, a curator at the State Capitol Museum, Jacob was also known to serve tea and to park cars at the Governor's Mansion from time to time.

Perhaps most intriguing is curator Sgromo's understanding that Jacob also did legal work for the Governor, including doing important preparatory work for the special legislative session called by Governor Pardee in the wake of the state's greatest tragedy ever, the 1906 earthquake and fires. Sgromo states that Soares was well-known for his

(con't on reverse)

David Nicolai is New Museum Director

Since last September, David Nicolai has served as Director of the Pardee Home Museum. David came to the house in 1991, as a member of the museum's very first docent training class, shortly after moving from Chicago to Oakland. He enjoyed his volunteer work at the home so much that he decided to try to make it his profession, so he entered the graduate program in museum studies at San Francisco State University. He is currently at work on a "creative work project," an exhibit on the history of the



Oakland Tribune and the Tribune Tower, to be installed in that historic building when its imminent- renovation is completed, in order to complete the requirements for his degree.

Nicolai says that one of the most compelling reasons for moving from Chicago to Oakland was his hope that a smaller city might provide greater opportunities to do the type of work which he most enjoys, and

Oakland has certainly fulfilled his expectations in that regard. Two weeks after moving here, David went on his first Oakland Heritage Alliance (OHA) walking tour. The following week he joined OHA and went on his second walking tour, where he learned that docent-training was about to begin at the Pardee Home, which he had never heard of. Six months later he began leading tours of the house as it opened to the public for the first time, in January, 1992. Over five years and thousands of visitors later, David can still say that showing the house is his first love.

David joined the Board of OHA in the summer of 1995, & currently serves as its secretary. He also was a weekend docent in the California history gallery of the Oakland Museum for two years, until his promotion at the Pardee Home made it impractical to continue with this volunteer work. He has been very active on the advisory council overseeing the upcoming renovation of Lafayette Square Park (kitty corner from the museum) and will continue to work to see that the historic interpretation of the renovated park be handled properly.

David is keen on increasing the number of school groups which visit the house (since most young visitors to the

house love it), promoting cooperative tours and marketing of the Pardee Home and other nearby historic sites such as Preservation Park, City Hall, and Old Oakland, raising the profile of the Preservation Park Historic District in which we are located through proper signage, improving the accessibility of our outstanding archives to local scholars, and any other improvements to our museum which its supporters might suggest.

When David was promoted last year, the outgoing director of the museum, Melissa Rosengard, became the new Chairperson of the Pardee Home Foundation Trustees, where she continues to provide outstanding leadership to the museum. Melissa has been busy - raising her two young children, Allison, 4, and Nicky, 1, traveling with her family to Asia and Europe, completing her master's degree in art history at the University of Illinois-Chicago, and continuing to serve on the boards of the Artship Foundation and Victorian Preservation Center of Oakland.

Vicki Wiese Joins Museum Staff

Last autumn Vicki Wiese, who was entering the graduate program in museum studies at John F. Kennedy University in Orinda, called museum and told us that she wanted to volunteer here, since her goal was to work in a historic house museum after completing her master's. After a short period of volunteering once a week, the museum director and trustees were so impressed with her excellent work that it was decided to hire her as a part-time registration assistant.

Vicki hails from Vancouver, Washington and attended Western Washington University in Bellingham, where she received a degree in history and art history in 1996. In Bellingham she interned at the Whatcom Museum of History and Art, and during her summers she volunteered at the Oregon Historical Society and the Portland Art Museum in Portland, Oregon. This summer Vicki returned to the historical society, where she worked on creating a website (perhaps she can help us set up a website for the Pardee Home in the future), and she also interned at the Aurora Colony Museum in Aurora, Oregon, where she began to inventory their vast and unorganized collections.

Vicki enjoyed returning to her native Pacific Northwest this summer, but she is delighted to be back to her work at the Pardee Home, where she has been working to make our archives more accessible and doing minor conservation work on some of our valuable posters and election paraphernalia. But her major responsibility has been continuing with the seemingly never-ending task of computer cataloging of our vast collections. We upgraded our computer cataloging software - "Gencat" - this past winter, and we will soon be receiving a new "Windows" upgrade; Vicki has been busy utilizing our improved software, cataloging some 600 objects during over fifty hours in front of the terminal. She hopes to have thousands more catalogued by the end of this school year, and as a school project plans to curate and install a new temporary exhibit in the billiard room. Vicki has brought great energy and professionalism to her work at the house, and she is certain to enjoy a successful career in the museum field.

