

IT'S ONE THING TO LEARN that 415 Ocean Front, a name no longer used, was synonymous in the 1920s and 1930s with what William Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies called the Beach House (not Ocean House, as the place was later renamed). But was the Beach House his or hers—or jointly theirs? In turn, should the 415 Ocean Front property of decades ago be thought of as the Hearst-Davies mansion or rather as the Marion Davies Estate? Both terms and still others have been used.

These and many more questions are what these PDF files about the “Santa Monica connection” in Hearst and Marion’s lives seek to answer. Taylor Coffman began steeping himself in the lore surrounding Hearst Castle, San Simeon, in the 1970s; he remains the leading scholar of “Hearstiana,” and he draws here upon his knowledge of William Randolph Hearst, Marion Davies, and Julia Morgan, the San Francisco architect without whom such places as San Simeon, Wynton, and the Beach House would have remained figments of the imagination—of Hearst’s imagination, above all.

Morgan’s job ledgers include the ones she devoted to her work for Hearst and Marion in Santa Monica from 1926 to 1938. Privately held by Morgan’s goddaughter Lynn Forney McMurray, the ledgers have been brought to editorial heel by Coffman in the appendices he’s prepared for this digital presentation. Its PDF files also contain numerous excerpts from both archival and printed sources, passages that throw much more light than has been seen before on 415 Ocean Front, the grand mansion that once was but that is no more. The excerpts are equally illuminating where Hearst and Marion’s personal lives are concerned from the mid-1920s to the late 1940s. Indeed, this presentation is often more biographical than it is architectural.

The main part of the Beach House compound, razed in 1956, can't be rebuilt as it originally looked. Reconstructing parts of its history—for they are only parts—is a daunting enough task, one that Coffman's work accomplishes with rare skill, finesse, and many surprising twists.

TAYLOR COFFMAN was a tour guide at San Simeon from 1972 to 1983. By 1976 he began concentrating on research and, inevitably, on writing. As an archivist, he has processed and catalogued thousands of historical documents stemming from the lives of William Randolph Hearst, Marion Davies, Julia Morgan, and others in their circle. The Beach House in Santa Monica is a subject he has long had in mind, one for which his knowledge of Hearst's most renowned projects, San Simeon and Wynton, and his familiarity with greater Los Angeles and Southern California has equipped him uniquely.