What an honor to be here. It is truly wonderful that so much has been done to transfer this small plot of land into public ownership so that it can remain a permanent fixture of the Bay Area’s rich maritime heritage.

For me to be standing by the house that was first inhabited by my great-grandfather’s grandfather, the first on the Dutch side of my family to settle in America, seems like a great homecoming - even if it has been more than 10 dozen years since a Dirks lived here. Reading about the other well-known shipwrights who also lived in this house and in neighboring houses no longer standing makes this an especially historic location. What happened here all of those years ago certainly had a multi-generational influence on my family that continues to this day.

Seeing the house makes me wonder if any or all of his six children lived here too. The place doesn’t look big enough for that.

Here’s what my great-uncle, the late George Dirks of Walnut Creek, wrote about his great-grandfather:
“Jan Janse Dirks, born 1825, arrived in San Francisco from Holland on a German sailing ship in 1851. He was the ship’s carpenter, but after sailing around Cape Horn, he felt he had enough of life on the seas and he jumped ship to make a new life in San Francisco. He was six feet, six inches tall and strong as an ox. His friends called him “Long John” or “Honest John the Hollander.”

Long John started a ship repair shop on Potrero at the foot of Sixteenth Street. He began building scows in the Islais Creek area that became known as Butchertown, due to the rendering plants and slaughterhouses there.

I like that John Dirks was the first shipwright to settle here at India Basin in 1868, possibly because he couldn’t take the stench from Butchertown, but also that he likely saw a lot of opportunity to grow his business on these shores. That made him a true entrepreneur, as well as a pioneer.

Jan J. married a German-born woman, Gesa Dammann 1854. Their kids were John A. Minny, Delia, Henry, Ellen and George Jesse Dirks.

Through the generations we have lost track of any descendents of the older five. Their youngest, George Jesse, was my great-great grandfather.

George Jesse continued in the maritime trade. We know he worked at the Matthew Turner shipyard in Benicia, where he was the boss caulker and his son, George Oliver Dirks, served his caulking apprenticeship. One of the ships they built was The Equator, a two-masted pygmy trading schooner that carried passengers Robert Louis Stevenson and his wife, Fanny, on a voyage through the islands of
Micronesia and was the inspiration of the story, "The Wrecker," in his book: "Tales of the South Seas."

The story goes that the newly built 80-foot Equator and the British battleship Calliope were the only ships to ride out the great Samoan hurricane of March, 1889, where winds raged up to 200 miles per hour and cast waves 80-feet high. The storm destroyed three American and three German ships of war and cost hundreds of lives. No one dreamed the relatively small vessel Equator could survive it. But she did, certainly due in no small part to the expert building and watertight caulking by George Jesse Dirks and his crew to make her so buoyant. By the way, the Equator spent her final days as a tug in Puget Sound and still stands in dry dock in the Port of Everett, in desperate need for a little Tender Loving Care.

My own grandfather, Clarence Oliver Dirks, also was also a caulker, learning the trade from his father George Oliver (son of George Jesse). He quit school for a time in the eighth grade so that he could work in the shipyards during World War I, which he did again during World War II. He attended high school in Palo Alto where he became an All-American football player – probably helped by the muscles he’d built up swinging the big sledgehammer-like caulking tool known as a beetle.

Clarence was recruited by the University of Washington in 1926 and was named captain of the Huskies in 1928. Later as a sportswriter for the Seattle P-I he
covered the UW’s crew team in the years leading up to their Gold Medal victory against Nazi Germany in the 1936 Olympics. He became a well-read newspaper columnist for the P-I as well as a farmer and lay preacher, but continued to supplement his income as a ship caulker until he was well into his 70s. I remember that he always had one wood-planked boat or another behind his barn to work on too, in fact he gave us one for Christmas one year. Most of our family’s caulking tools were donated to the Maritime Museum here in San Francisco but we still have some mallets and other stray tools on a garage shelf.

My own father, Martin Dirks, became a prominent civil engineer in Seattle and never worked in the maritime business, nor did any of his five sons – including my younger (and much taller) brother, John Dirks. But we all have a great love of boating and the water that we inherited from our forefathers. My uncle Mike Dirks raised two sons in Spokane, one of whom is on temporary leave as a developer from his job at YouTube here in the Bay area.

My dad, now 80, has as one of his proudest possessions an ornate gold pocket watch made by a jeweler in Sacramento that belonged to Jan Janse Dirks.

John J. Dirks lived to age of 92 and is buried over in San Mateo County with Gesa and two of their children. An interesting footnote to his story is that a few years following the death of his beloved Gesa in 1891 the old man apparently remarried a much younger woman named Sarah. He made her sign a pre-nup but she welched on it that very afternoon. After she died – we don’t know how – he sued the trust
company handling her estate for the squandered sum, a case that made it all the way to the California Supreme Court. They found for Dirks.

So Jan Janse won, just as the residents of India Basin and the whole Bay area won by their dedication to this property and the important history that it holds. Once again our family is very grateful for all you have done, and for the opportunity to be a small part of this lasting legacy and common birthright. Thank you.

Hello Bayview Historical Society,

Thank you again for your gracious offer to subsidize Brian Dirk’s trip to participate in the 900 Innes ribboncutting!

His airfare receipt is attached - as you can see, the flight alone was close to $600; with lodging and transit, the total journey ran about $900, so your $400 contribution really did make the difference in enabling him to be there to represent his family and the history of the site.

If you would, please mail a check made to “Brian Dirks” to 35432 26th Place S., Federal Way, WA 98003.

I’m also happy to share a writeup of Brian’s comments at the celebration (also attached), for the BHS records.