

## Physical History

### 1848 - 1877

From the late eighteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth century the area now occupied by the Sutro District was part of Rancho Punta de Lobos, a large Mexican land grant. Following the formal acquisition of California by the United States in 1848, these lands became part of the City and County of San Francisco. Comprising the westernmost tip of San Francisco, the area around Point Lobos was considered remote and inaccessible for most of the nineteenth century and came to be known as the Outside Lands.

By 1854, Point Lobos Bluff had been homesteaded by a potato farmer named Chambers, but remained relatively undeveloped (see photo, History #1). Hikers and horseback riders reached this portion of the Pacific coast on one of several trails crossing the six miles of sand dunes that lay between downtown San Francisco and the sea. By the middle 1850s, travelers could rest and take refreshment at Seal Rock House located at the foot of the cliff near Seal Rock, or at Ocean House four miles to the south on the western end of the Mission Dolores trail to the beach.

With the rapid influx of people and money associated with the California Gold Rush, San Francisco developed quickly during the 1850s. Between 1850 and 1860, the local population nearly doubled, growing from 35,000 to 56,000. More significantly, the entire city changed abruptly from a ragged frontier town with unpaved streets and crudely constructed wooden buildings into a modern, well-organized, and almost elegant city.

In the late 1850s, Charles C. Butler, a well-known San Francisco real estate magnate, purchased 160 acres around Point Lobos. Although Butler had planned originally to hold the land until profitable to sell, he soon decided to develop the site as a fashionable resort. In 1862, Butler joined forces with Senator James Buckley and James Phelan to form the Point Lobos Road Company. In February 1863, work began on a road that would lead from Point Lobos cliff to the site of the proposed new resort, and then to the beach below. Point Lobos Avenue, completed in several months at a cost of \$175,000, provided a direct route from the end of Bush Street (at today's Presidio Avenue) past the site of the Cliff House to Ocean Beach.

When completed, the Point Lobos Road was 110 feet wide, mostly paved in macadam. One side of the road was developed as a mile-and-a-half long clay speedway for fast-trotting horses with rolled and watered clay paving. By 1863, a horse-drawn stage-coach made the trip from Portsmouth Square to the Point Lobos area each Sunday.

Simultaneous with the development of Point Lobos Road, Butler and Buckley oversaw the construction of the first Cliff House. The first Cliff House was a relatively simple, one-story, frame and clapboard structure (see photo, History #2). Early photographs show only a paved pull-in and sidewalk between the front façade of the building and Point Lobos Road. Butler placed Captain Julius Foster in charge of the operation of the Cliff House. Butler's plan for the Cliff House was to develop a fashionable resort for affluent San Franciscans. Owing to his success, Butler had the Cliff House enlarged to three times its original size with additions to both the north and south ends. Other alterations included a platform added to the roadside of the Cliff House to shelter visitors from the wind and a broad, seaside verandah that could be used as an outdoor dance floor.

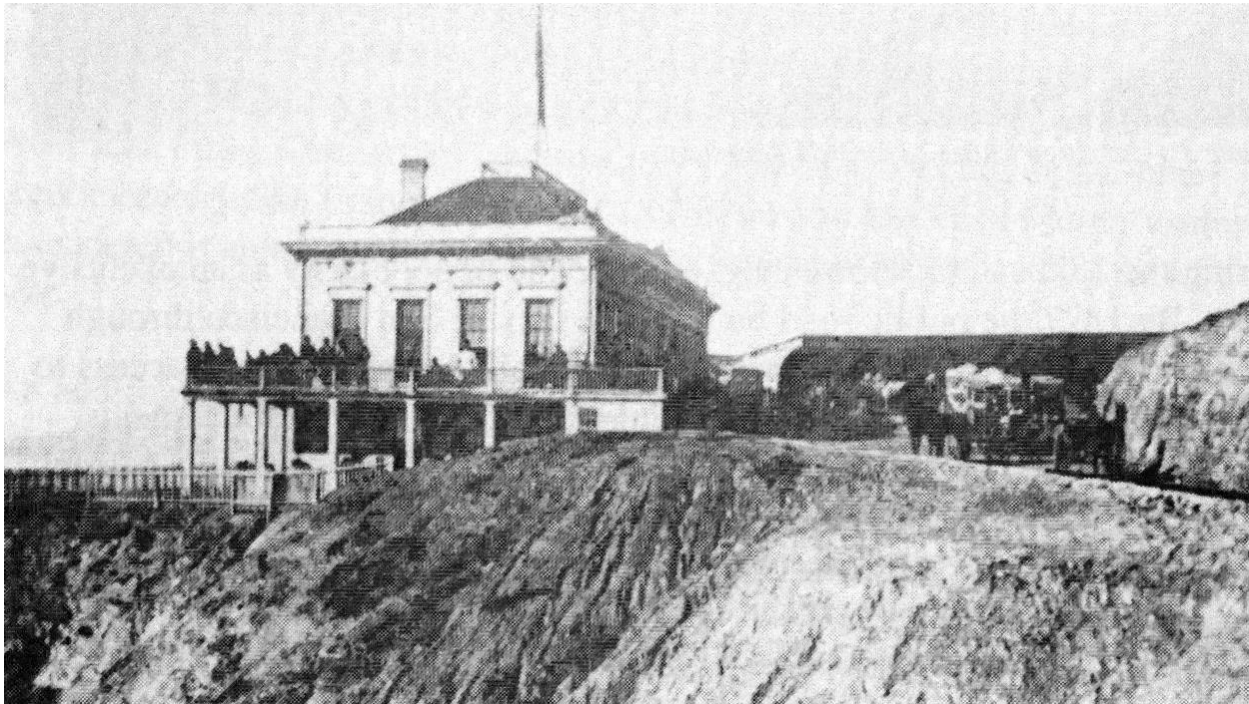
In 1868, the City of San Francisco acquired the future site of Golden Gate Park, a one-half mile wide

tract of land that fronted on the ocean and extended three miles inland, in response to the lack of open public space. The development of recreational facilities for the public had been ignored during the late nineteenth century even though there was a great influx of money into the city due to gold and silver mining. Instead, wealth was displayed in the construction of grand mansions and luxurious hotels and restaurants. In 1871, under the auspices of William H. Hall, work began on the development of the 1,017 acre park. By the end of the decade, the park featured two miles of roads and paths, more than 135,000 trees and shrubs, and a greenhouse and nursery.

During the 1870s, Cliff House began to decline in popularity as an exclusive resort. By 1877, the public road built by the City of San Francisco through Golden Gate Park to the beach was providing access to all classes of people to the Cliff House vicinity. Increased competition from new establishments developing along the shore influenced Butler to lure new patrons by offering gambling, alcohol, and late hours. By the late 1870s, the Cliff House was attracting a less fashionable clientele.



*History #1: Site of Sutro Baths before construction. (CLR, 1993)*



*History #2: The first Cliff House and surroundings. (CLR, 1993)*

## **1881 - 1887**

When Adolph Sutro moved to San Francisco in the late 1870s, he purchased real estate in the city, much of which was still undeveloped. His efforts were focused largely on purchasing the Outside Lands. In March 1881, he purchased the future site of his Sutro Heights home while visiting the home of Samuel Tetlow. Tetlow's small frame cottage was located on a promontory overlooking the Cliff House and Seal Rocks with views of the Pacific Ocean, Mount Tamalpais, and the Golden Gate. Sutro was supposedly so entranced by the site that he made a deposit of \$1,000 (on a total sale price of \$15,000) for the cottage and an adjoining 1.65 acres that afternoon. Sutro also purchased the 21.21 acres adjacent to the cottage as well as eighty acres of shore lands bordering Fort Miley and part of the future Lincoln Park, which included the Cliff House.

At the time that Sutro first visited his new residence, Tetlow apparently had enlarged the cottage and started a small garden. Four tiers of picket fences, intended to prevent erosion, stood between the cottage and the steep hillside overlooking the Point Lobos Road.

Sutro retained the relatively modest appearance of the cottage during renovation. Instead, Sutro concentrated on the immediate development of elaborate gardens that would eventually cover the twenty-acre site. Much of the early site work consisted of creating an environment conducive to the growth of tender garden plants and included the construction of tall, wooden, slat fences on the north and west exposures and the planting of eucalyptus, cypress, and pine tree wind breaks. Sutro's plans depended on extensive site grading to create the numerous terraces that later developed into individual garden rooms defined by paths, plantings, and gentle slopes (see photo, History #3). Dating from the site's development, there was also the establishment of "The Old Grove," a grouping of eucalyptus, cypress, and pine trees planted approximately ten to fifteen feet on center and located in front of the Sutro

residence. There were also eight axial walkways that radiated from a central point, giving the grove a formal appearance, and establishing it as a central organizing element.

Prior to Sutro's acquisition of the site, the main entrance to Sutro Heights was located on lower Point Lobos Avenue (currently at the junction of Serpentine Drive and Ivy Lane), from which point a road climbed up the site's steep north slope. Around 1883, a new main entrance to the site was developed at Palm Avenue on the corner of 48th Street and Point Lobos Avenue; the original entrance on lower Point Lobos Avenue came to be used as the service or private entrance. The development of the Palm Avenue entrance as the primary entrance to the site responded to the 1883 placement of a major depot (the Ocean Terrace stop) of the Park and Ocean Railroad directly across the street. The low fares offered by the railroad resulted in increased visitation by San Franciscans who frequently made Sutro Heights the first stop on their trips to the Point Lobos shore.

By 1883, prominent gates marked both the main and private entrances. The main gate was a highly decorative wood structure more than twenty-five feet tall and flanked by two statues of reclining lions. This truss-like structure consisted of a central carriage entrance arch and half arches on each side for pedestrian passage, supported by decorative wood columns. The carriage entrance was secured by side-hinged double gates and the two pedestrian entrances had similar single gates. The gate at the private or service entrance on lower Point Lobos Avenue has been described as a smaller wooden structure flanked by statues of animals. In addition to the two Point Lobos Avenue entrances, secondary entrances were located along the east and southeast edges of the site, and each was marked by a minor gate.

Three main roadways were created at Sutro Heights as part of the initial development of the property: Palm Avenue, the Esplanade, and Serpentine Drive. Palm Avenue was the most formal, lined with palm-like *Dracena draco* trees, edged with a carefully trimmed lawn and linear flower beds, and terminating with a carriage turnaround marked by planters, statues, and a fountain. Graded and graveled with crushed local sandstone, the main roads on the site were intended for pedestrians, and limited carriage and horseback use. Wherever necessary for proper drainage, roads on the site were lined with concrete swale gutters, approximately one foot wide. In 1891, a system of brick-lined catch-basins connected with terra-cotta drain pipes was installed on the Esplanade, to prevent the erosion of the cliff below. The entire length of the Esplanade was lined with an ornamental wooden post and chain fence to define the overlook, and keep visitors away from the cliffs below.

Along with the main roads, narrower secondary paths, also paved with crushed stone, passed through the gardens and were limited to pedestrian use. These secondary paths led the visitor through the gardens in a meandering, leisurely style, and featured lookouts, seating areas, and garden structures.

Sutro created a thick forest of trees interspersed by small formal and semi-formal flower beds and planting displays. The outdoor rooms created within the forest, linked by a series of paths within the tree canopy, provided the light and shelter necessary for successful plant cultivation. The terraced garden rooms were designed to feature specific plants, a piece of sculpture, or a scenic view. All featured an open central lawn framed by decorative plantings and surrounded either by forest or open to the west with a view of the ocean. Several of these areas had descriptive names such as the Rosarium, the Oval, and the Adonis.

Along with the garden rooms, Sutro incorporated several other planting features. A hedge maze was located in the northeast corner of the grounds. Carpet beds or parterres were another prominent planting feature. The greatest concentration of planting displays was arranged along Palm Avenue in front of the carriage turnaround. Intricate parterres were located to the west of Palm Avenue opposite the conservatory. Popular in England and America during the Victorian era, these beds consisted of finely

trimmed displays of annual or seasonal flowers arranged in various shapes and patterns. Historic photographs of Sutro Heights taken during this period show an American flag, with the date "1889" and the other bearing the name "Sutro Heights." Known to have been in place by 1885, these flower beds required extensive maintenance by skilled gardeners and horticulturalists.

The Gnomes Arbor Vitae, another striking garden feature at Sutro Heights, was a sculpted hedge of American Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*) in front of the conservatory. The hedge consisted of a straight segment approximately 130 feet long with two sixty foot lateral rows of arborvitae radiating from its center at sixty degree angles and creating three wedge-shaped planting areas with a Norfolk Island pine centered in each. At maturity, the hedge reached a height of twenty feet, and despite the extensive pruning it required, appears to have been well-maintained into the 1920s.

Sutro used largely drought-tolerant plant materials, many of which were native to similar climates in the Mediterranean, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. Species were selected for quick growth and tolerance to seaside conditions. Constant changes of the plant materials used in the beds and annual borders as Sutro experimented with new species and patterns kept a large staff of gardeners employed. The major forest trees planted on the site included Monterey cypress and pine, maritime pine, and eucalyptus. Dracena palms and Norfolk Island pines were used as specimens and accents. Shrubs included hydrangeas, roses, rhododendrons, hebe, and coprosma with phormiums as accents. Hedges were of yew and arborvitae. Annuals and perennials used in beds and borders consisted of geraniums, salvias, chrysanthemums, and violas. Agaves grew in planters and beds. The formal carpet beds, or parterres, included a variety of succulents, trimmed herbs, boxwood, and miniatures.

A spring located below on the future site of the Sutro Baths supplied water for the gardens. Windmills pumped the water to a 50,000 gallon storage tank located on 48th Avenue at A Street and to another 15,000 gallon tank located atop the parapet. The water was then gravity-fed from these two high points to the various portions of the garden. Portable sprinklers aided in garden irrigation.

Numerous statues, planters, and fountains were located on the grounds at Sutro Heights. During his 1883 tour of Europe, Sutro arranged for the casting of more than 200 pieces of sculpture in Belgium, which were shipped from Antwerp to San Francisco in 1884. The sculptures, along with rustic benches, chairs, and tables, were displayed on the grounds at Sutro Heights. Sutro's intent was for the statuary to provide accessible examples of European culture to the visitors in the park. In addition, planting urns flanked sculptures, such as "Venus de Milo" and the fountain located in the center of the carriage turnaround, as well as provided borders for the terraced lawn near the conservatory (see photo, History #4). Other planting urns served as carpet bed focal points.

One of the first major structures built following the remodeling of the residence was the rock and sandstone parapet located immediately west of the residence (see photo, History #5). Sited on the highest point of the estate, the parapet continues to provide breathtaking views of the surrounding coastal scenery. Since its completion in 1895, the parapet has been a major focal point, observation platform, and Sutro Heights visitor destination.

As built, the parapet was a curved sandstone wall that extended in a semicircle for 280 feet. Two 100-foot walls projected from the north and south ends, creating a partial "D" shape. A small storage cellar with an arched doorway, possibly used as a wine cellar, was located on the north wall. Between the two rear walls a sloping ramp provided access to the top viewing platform. On the western side of the parapet there was a narrow stone staircase connected to the Esplanade. The parapet floor was covered with crushed native sandstone. Thirty stone crenellations, each topped with either a concrete statue or planting urn and linked together with iron pipe railings, defined the top edge of the parapet. Initially,