

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

BALBOA PARK, GOLDEN HILL FOUNTAIN GROTTO

HALS NO. CA-150-A

- Location:** 2590 Golden Hill Drive, San Diego, San Diego County, California
- 32.719642, -117.141156 (Fountain, Golden Hill Park area, southeast corner of Balboa Park, Google Earth, WGS84)
- Significance:** An example of Arts & Crafts design, the Golden Hill fountain grotto constructed in 1908 is the oldest decorative built feature in Balboa Park. Jointly funded by the Golden Hill Improvement Committee and the City of San Diego, the fountain grotto resulted from one of the early private-public partnerships essential to the development of San Diego's largest urban park.
- Description:** In 1868 San Diego set aside 1400 acres near its developing downtown center as a public park. Now reduced to 1200 acres, Balboa Park is a cultural center, nature preserve, recreation hub, and home to the San Diego Zoo. There are numerous designed gardens in the park and its large urban forest represents 448 different tree species. The Golden Hill fountain grotto is found in the southeast quadrant of Balboa Park in an area of early park development known as Golden Hill Park.

Nestled into a hillside at the head of a deep canyon, the sunken fountain grotto cannot easily be seen from Golden Hill Drive. A few yards south of the street, among untended low plants, the grotto entrance is signaled by rugged stone cairns flanking a descending stairway. This is one of twin curving stairways leading down the canyon wall to the grotto; each was built with San Diego's plentiful cobblestones.

In the semi-encircled lower level, a deliberately rough-hewn round fountain dominates. It is four-feet wide and has a central basin, all built of local stone and concrete. The fountain rests on a platform of three rounded steps. Curving away from each side of the fountain, rustic stone retaining walls rise six feet above a smooth stone floor. Makeshift benches stand at each side of the fountain. They replace the originals which followed the curve of the retaining walls. In this protected retreat visitors are removed from park activities above and oriented toward a verdant canyon. A one-foot high wall defines the canyon side of the grotto. At each end the low wall connects with a stairway, symbolically enclosing the space. The grotto was meant by its planners to be "cozy" and the flowing water of the fountain was intended to evoke the natural springs found in the mountains of East San Diego County.

The fountain has long been dry and the top is plugged to prevent its use as a fire pit, one of the depredations that ensued when the grotto went into decline in the 1930s. The grotto bears the scars of decades of official neglect, vandalism and

misuse, but the site has been made safe for visitors. Stairways are usable and the stone fountain and walls are stable.

The original decorative landscaping around the grotto has not been maintained or replaced. The immediate surroundings are dotted with succulents and a few other plants, but the area does not receive regular maintenance and is overgrown and weedy. A large Coast Live Oak tree growing in the canyon just outside the low grotto wall shades the seating area.

History: The prosperous residents of Golden Hill near the southeast corner of San Diego's Balboa Park became impatient with the city's failure to develop the urban park land near their homes. At the end of the 19th century, the Golden Hill Improvement Committee began to beautify the nearby area of Balboa Park with tree planting and flower gardens. In 1907 the community decided to build a fountain as the crowning addition to "Golden Hill Park," as that area of Balboa Park is still known. Three prominent San Diegans are closely identified with the project.

Leroy A. Wright (1893-1944), lawyer, banker, civic activist and politician was a resident of Golden Hill and a driving force within the neighborhood Improvement Committee. He also was a member of the San Diego Park Commission providing an inside track for securing city permission for alterations of park land. Wright is believed to have proposed the construction of a fountain and he was instrumental in pushing the project forward.

Architect Henry Lord Gay (1844-1921) was hired in 1907 by the Golden Hill Improvement Committee to design a fountain for the park. Gay had practiced in Illinois and Wisconsin for more than 35 years before relocating to San Diego in 1906. One of his local commissions was the Western Metal Supply Company building, today preserved and adaptively reused as part of San Diego's downtown baseball park. Gay proposed building a fountain within a sunken stone grotto, then sidelined his design after discovering a 420-pound clamshell he wanted to incorporate into the fountain. Unwilling to await new plans, Golden Hill leaders moved ahead with Gay's original design.

George Cooke (1844-1921), the first superintendent of Balboa Park, met with Golden Hill resident and park commissioner Leroy A. Wright in June 1907 to select a site for the fountain grotto. Cooke approved the plans and oversaw construction. He was an English immigrant with substantial landscape experience, particularly in site engineering and construction. His work in San Diego began in 1903 when, as a partner of Balboa Park landscape architect Samuel Parsons, Jr., he arrived from New York City to construct the first roads in the city park. Cooke made annual trips to implement other aspects of the Parsons plan. He relocated to San Diego in January 1907 and accepted the position of park superintendent.

On March 8, 1908, a local newspaper announced the completion of the fountain grotto. This first decorative built feature in Balboa Park drew many visitors and was captured on a picture postcard showing an installation of rich landscaping in the area surrounding the grotto. Influenced by Arts & Crafts sensibilities, the fountain grotto was designed in the spirit of an inglenook, promising a place of sheltered repose. Local materials were used in its construction and it was unobtrusively fitted into the natural terrain. The rounded steps upon which the fountain rests are similar to those seen in the work of English Arts & Crafts architect Edwin Lutyens.

The attraction of the fountain grotto was substantially diluted when the 1915 Panama-California Exposition transformed the previously under-developed Balboa Park, permanently adding new buildings, roads, trails and landscaped gardens. Fading popularity and a later civic amnesia removed the fountain grotto from San Diego's recorded history. For decades it was not mentioned in local newspapers. It was overlooked by historians and guides. The Precise Plan for the East Mesa zone of Balboa Park adopted in 1993 did take cognizance of the Golden Hill fountain and called for its reconstruction, but that plan's implementation has been slow and selective.

After decades of neglect and marginalization, the historical significance of the fountain grotto as an early Balboa Park feature and an example of Arts & Crafts design was slowly awaked. San Diego Save Our Heritage Organisation placed the fountain grotto on its "most endangered" list of 2009. The fountain grotto has subsequently garnered a degree of popular attention in San Diego. It has been made safe, stabilized and cleaned up. Yet, without a specific plan and financial support for its preservation and renovation, the historic fountain grotto faces an uncertain future.

Sources

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Historian: Nancy Carol Carter
July 15, 2020

Entry 2020 HALS Challenge: Vanishing or Lost Landscapes



Approach to the canyon site of the Balboa Park Golden Hill Fountain Grotto. Rugged stone cairns mark one of the twin stairways curving down the canyon side. (Nancy Carol Carter, July 14, 2020)



One of the two Balboa Park Golden Hill Fountain Grotto cobblestone stairways. (Nancy Carol Carter, July 14, 2020)



In the sunken Balboa Park Golden Hill Fountain Grotto the fountain has a protruding basin, replacement benches sit atop original stone supports and curved retaining walls enclose the space. A large Coast Live Oak tree provides shade. (Nancy Carol Carter, July 14, 2020)



Low wall on the canyon side of the Balboa Park Golden Hill Fountain Grotto. (Nancy Carol Carter, July 14, 2020)



Balboa Park Golden Hill Fountain Grotto rustic stonework detail. (Nancy Carol Carter, July 14, 2020)