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Gardens of an Historic Cowper Street Residence

John N. Roberts



Kathleen Norris was the most prolific and successful romance novelist in the country during the 1920s, 30s and 40s. At one point she reportedly earned more money than President Herbert Hoover and Babe Ruth combined.¹ In 1927 Kathleen and her husband Charles moved to Palo Alto, California, and built a stunning house in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. The house quickly became the center of the social world of Palo Alto, Stanford University, and the whole San Francisco Peninsula.

Local architect Birge Clark carefully sited the Norris House within an old oak woodland near downtown Palo Alto. He designed the building with a keen sensitivity to the local environment and a clear vision of the Spanish/

Mexican/Californio architectural heritage. The elegant proportions, gracious flow of space, indoor-outdoor relationships, and fine finish materials make it an architectural jewel. The building is now deservedly listed on the National Register of Historic Places, cited for its architectural design as well as the literary and social prominence of the original owners.²

Less well recognized than the landmark building is the cultural heritage of the site. The identity of this place is linked directly with its landscape setting, embodied in and symbolized by its magnificent oak trees. On the advice of Clark, the Norrises had purchased a specific lot at the corner of Cowper Street and Melville Avenue because of

its mature trees. In his memoir about the Norris House, Clark described how the preservation of these trees “... added immeasurably to the instant photogenic character of the house.”³ For Kathleen, the trees also evoked layers of memory. When she wrote about her new house in *Country Life* in 1929, she included reference to the “dozen memorial oaks” there, followed by a provocative muse on “just what makes trees memorial.”⁴

These trees and their supporting natural system provide a touchstone for this article. As part of a vast inter-

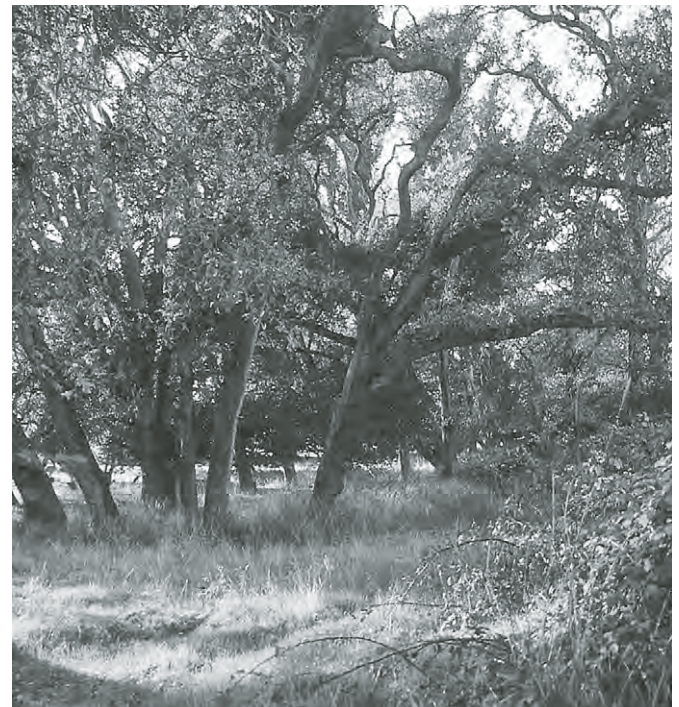
connected woodland, they began life before Europeans arrived. They matured during the Rancho era, shading *vaqueros* and grazing cattle. The woodland survived the construction of a grid of city streets in the late 1800s. And, at an age of more than 150 years, the trees inspired one of California’s great buildings. Now, in decline, the surviving oaks tower over new gardens and shelter a reemerging woodland. By looking back at the history of human relationships with the Cowper Street landscape, one can discover a multilayered identity of place.



Opposite: Norris House rear courtyard in 1929. The dramatic plantings at the base of the building complement the building style and are compatible with the local climate. The extensive irrigated croquet lawn, however, is incompatible with the native oaks, and led to their demise. Photo by Burton Crandall, courtesy Palo Alto Historical Association.

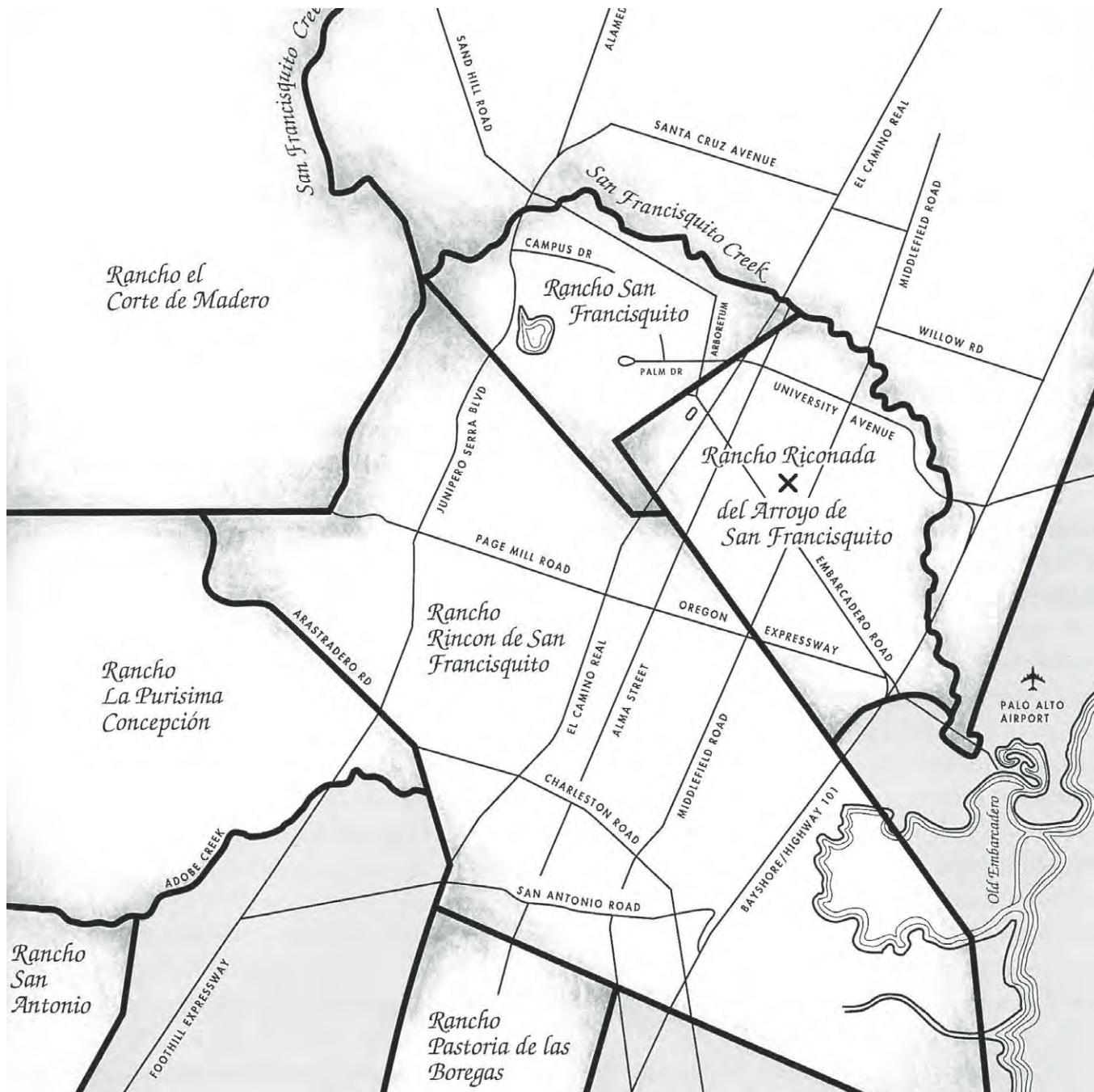
Left: Millions of acres of native oak woodlands have been lost throughout California. Many were converted to hayfields, as this image of Palo Alto at the turn of the twentieth century shows, before they finally succumbed to the pressures of urbanization. Photo courtesy of Palo Alto Historical Association.

Right: The Cowper Street site contains remnants of once vast oak woodlands that, in their natural state, looked much like this typical northern California “closed canopy” oak woodland. Photo by author.



Pre-European Landscape

Early explorers and scholarly histories describe Palo Alto’s natural environment as a mosaic of woodland, savanna, grassland and marsh, interwoven on a gently sloping plain, and cut by densely wooded streams. Within such a climax landscape, the Cowper site would have occupied the wooded edge of a grassy plain, about two miles south of San Francisquito Creek. Typical of areas with wet winters and hot, dry summers, the dense, moisture-loving riparian forest of the creek would have given way to mixed Live and Valley Oak groves along its bank-top, and then to tree-dotted savannas and open grasslands farther from the water. Such a pattern would have extended for several miles



in each direction, making the Cowper site's oaks part of an ecological continuum between the creek and the seasonally dry uplands.

Evidence of an ancient village has been found near San Francisquito Creek in the vicinity of the Cowper site. Early residents of the area lived near the trees, where fresh water was available and where they had easy access to nearby tidal marshes. The residents further manipulated the ecosystem by setting grassland fires to clear out brush and create an open landscape of grasses and forbs beneath fire-tolerant oaks. Burning also stimulated greater quantities of seed the following season, increased forage for deer, and made the harvesting of acorns easier.

Early-twentieth-century anthropologist Alfred Kroe-

ber has estimated that acorns were the primary daily food source for more than three-fourths of all native Californians.⁵ But in addition to providing for their subsistence, oaks and their acorns provided medicines, dyes, and spiritual symbols for the native peoples of California. Oaks were such an important part of the local landscape that early missionaries referred to the Santa Clara Valley, where Palo Alto is located, as “Llano de los Robles,” or Plain of Oaks.

The Ranchos and Early Palo Alto

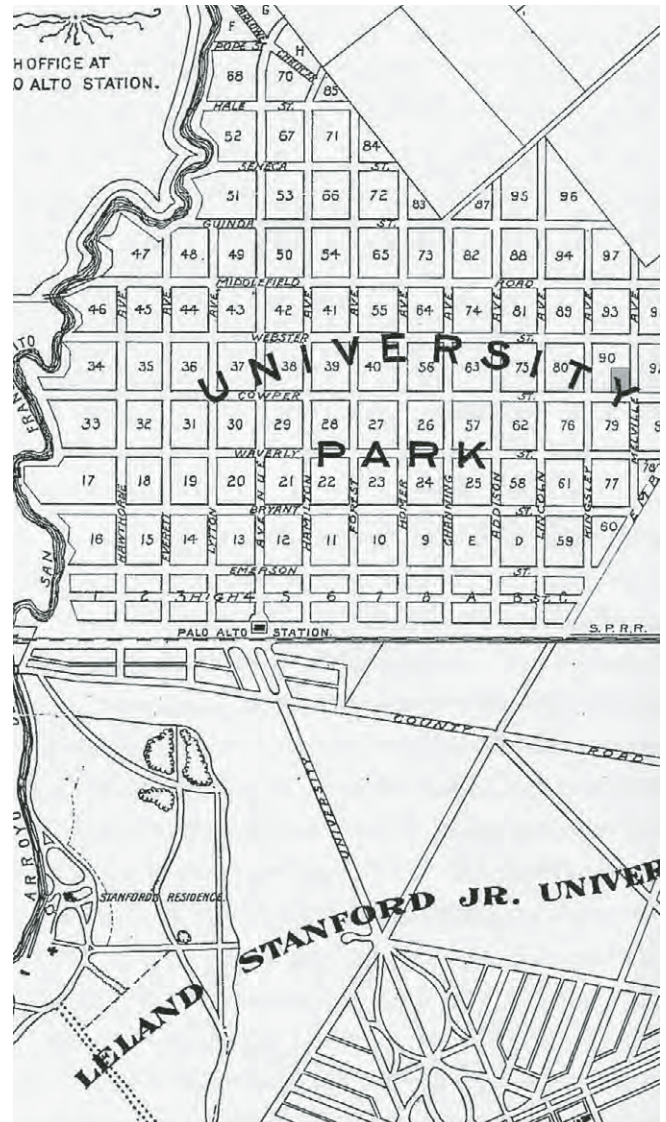
Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, European immigrants wrested the land from the Coastanoan people and fundamentally changed the landscape around Palo Alto. Their first settlements were often missions and pueb-

los that concentrated the native population, but ranchos were also established, bringing intensive farming and millions of grazing animals. Within the Spanish/Mexican system of land grants, the Cowper site was part of the 2,200-acre Rancho Rinconada del Arroyo de San Francisquito, which ran along the lower reach of San Francisquito Creek from the upland plains to the bay. This rancho was also a center of local commercial traffic, connecting El Camino Real (the Royal Road) with an *embarcadero* (port) on San Francisco Bay.

Unlike the native population, the new culture valued the local grassland for its commercial and agricultural potential. Imported cows were sources of leather, tallow and meat that could be sold in distant markets. By contrast, the oak trees were valued for shade, lumber and fuel—but not for food. Thus, although the lands might not have changed much in appearance, the landscape beneath the trees changed profoundly. Intensive grazing killed off the native perennial grasses; exotic annual grasses took over, slopes eroded, streams were downcut, and most oak seedlings were eliminated. As elsewhere in California, where millions of acres of oak-covered land were eventually cleared, by the time the City of Palo Alto was founded, much of the area's woodland had been converted to hay fields.

As David Streatfield has pointed out, the architecture and gardens of the early ranchos reflected the familiar patterns from Spain and Mexico, but at a more humble scale, and as adapted to the local climate.⁶ The *rancheros* managed their vast cattle empires from places like General Mariano Vallejo's Casa Grande (Big House), built in the 1830s and still standing in Petaluma seventy miles north of Palo Alto. The buildings were usually adobe and wood, with central work courts surrounded by residential quarters for the *vaqueros* and *padrones*. Daily life occurred in these courtyards, where food was cooked, leather processed, and tallow made. Much of the romance about early California flowed from nostalgia for such places—favorably sited in response to the climate, overlooking a pastoral landscape, and symbolic of unbridled, easily available wealth.

The rancho life proved fleeting, however. The flood of settlers to California after the 1849 Gold Rush brought new ideas about how to live, and new forms of construction reflected their diversity of origin. New patterns of settlement also capitalized on vast new wealth, a benign climate, massive diversions of water, and the cultivation of non-native plants in commercial nurseries. In the early 1850s, General Vallejo himself, the major figure of Mexican California, embraced the latest fashion and built a clapboard house with Gothic details surrounded by a picturesque



Opposite: The system of Spanish/Mexican land grants near present-day Palo Alto, overlaid with current major roads and new shorelines. The Cowper Street site is near the intersection of University Avenue and El Camino Real, just south of San Francisquito Creek. Map by Stanford Publication Services, Courtesy of Palo Alto Historical Association.

Above: In the late nineteenth century the land south of San Francisquito Creek, now part of the City of Palo Alto, was subdivided into blocks and lots for sale to people attracted by the newly founded Stanford University. The Cowper Street site is located on the southeast quadrant of block 90, just beneath the “Y” in University Park. Map, from 1889 promotional brochure, courtesy of Palo Alto Historical Association.

English-style garden and generous lawn.

One result of these changes was that by 1889, five years before the City of Palo was incorporated, most of Rancho Rinconada del Arroyo de San Francisquito had been subdivided into city lots. The streets were cut straight through the remnant oak woodland as a simple grid between San Francisquito Creek and the rancho's old Embarcadero Road. In legal terms, the Cowper Street parcel occupied the southwest quarter of Lot #90, bounded by Cowper St.,

Melville Ave., Webster St., and Kingsley Ave. It was located in an area named "University Park," marketed as a "tract of beautiful oak-park land" to staff, students and others connected with the recently created Stanford University.⁷

Within this new system of landscape values, individual oak trees were prized as objects or trophies to be owned, coveted and displayed in exotic new gardens. Ironically, however, in the years that followed, the bounty of life in the new city destroyed many of the area's trophy trees.



For many years it was any house, and all houses. We were going to build it some day, somewhere. It was nothing: it could be anything.

Then suddenly, from a thousand dreams of ravishing Paris gambrels, prim New England windows flanked by green blinds, Georgian doorways delicate in scrolls, square brick Colonial mansions painted creamy white, Italian terraces set with delicate statues, and the half-timbered,

oak-roofed beauty of the homes of Shakespeare's day, it finally emerged into infinite cloisters and grilles and patios with red tiling. It was to be a Spanish House.

This was partly because it had to be in California, and on the lot there already stood a dozen memorial oaks. Just what makes trees memorial one is never sure, but if elms can be, oaks can be, and these great oaks look every inch memorial. There

were peppers too, and eucalyptus trees, and combined with them a semi-arid climate that encourages the idea of fountains and balconies and awnings. So that the first thing we decided about it was that it should be truly Spanish.

— Kathleen Norris, "My Spanish House," *Country Life*, March 1929, p. 40.

People became comfortable with plentiful water delivered by elaborately engineered systems of reservoirs, pumps and pipes, and as summer-irrigated gardens became the norm, they also activated a deadly fungus in the soil.

Once again, the cultural values of the residents transformed the landscape, but this time to the oaks' detriment. Long acclimated to California's dry summers, the old trees could not survive irrigation or frequent disturbance to their delicate roots, and they slowly began dying off.

The Norris House, 1927 – 1946

After Kathleen and Charles Norris bought the Cowper Street property their first action was to remove a Victorian house already built there. Like other houses built by wealthy Californians in the early twentieth century, their new home would reflect the open architecture and simple, informal lifestyle popularized in the novel *Ramona* by Helen Hunt Jackson.⁸ Jackson's novel had mythologized a nineteenth-century rancho lifestyle whose harmony with the local environment contrasted vividly with the excesses of her own era. More specifically, its literary imagery evoked a fusion of the Mexican adobe/courtyard and New England garden that had evolved primarily in the homes of Yankee settlers who had intermarried with the locals.

Like others of her generation, this image appealed greatly to Kathleen's own creative imagination. She even named her house La Casa Abierta (the Open House). It "was going to look like one of the rambling, irregular, slipshod, lop-sided, untidy old farmhouses on the road to Valladolid," she wrote. Passers-by would "behold it" and see it was "... not a cheap modern affectation, but the real thing."⁹

Birge Clark translated these desires into form by creating a series of courtyards, with an easy flow between indoor and outdoor spaces, shady overhangs, and direct connections to the gardens. Locally produced tiles and metalwork added richness to the simple building forms. Appropriate to climate and setting, the courtyards served both as gardens and outdoor rooms, and they made good use of twelve memorial trees on the property.

Yet while the Norrises' house was a fine twentieth-century version of Spanish Colonial/Californio architecture, its grounds bore little resemblance to the reality of the dry California landscape. Kathleen, the romance novelist, wrote about begonias, roses and creepers in the courtyards, and "dashing desert cactus and whale-back cactus and stiletto cactus thrusting up their bold spears against the creamy walls."¹⁰ Such dramatic plants, well suited to the building style, the climate, and Kathleen's own romantic notions, do appear in historic photos of the building. But

Charles and Kathleen were also avid croquet players, and the Cowper Street lot contained a large croquet lawn similar to that at their old house in Saratoga, California. The genteel image of croquet players on an acre of lush green lawn beneath shady oak trees was in stark contrast to that of a *vaquero* shading himself in a dusty court outside an "untidy old farmhouse."

Meanwhile, the extensive irrigated garden that the Norrises installed and maintained also accelerated the decline of the mature oaks. Other homeowners on the San Francisco Peninsula, and in California in general, were unknowingly doing the same. David Streatfield has described how many other estate gardens of the era had large mown lawns beneath groves of ancient oaks.¹¹ When the current owners bought the property in 1999, only two of the Norrises' memorial oak trees remained.

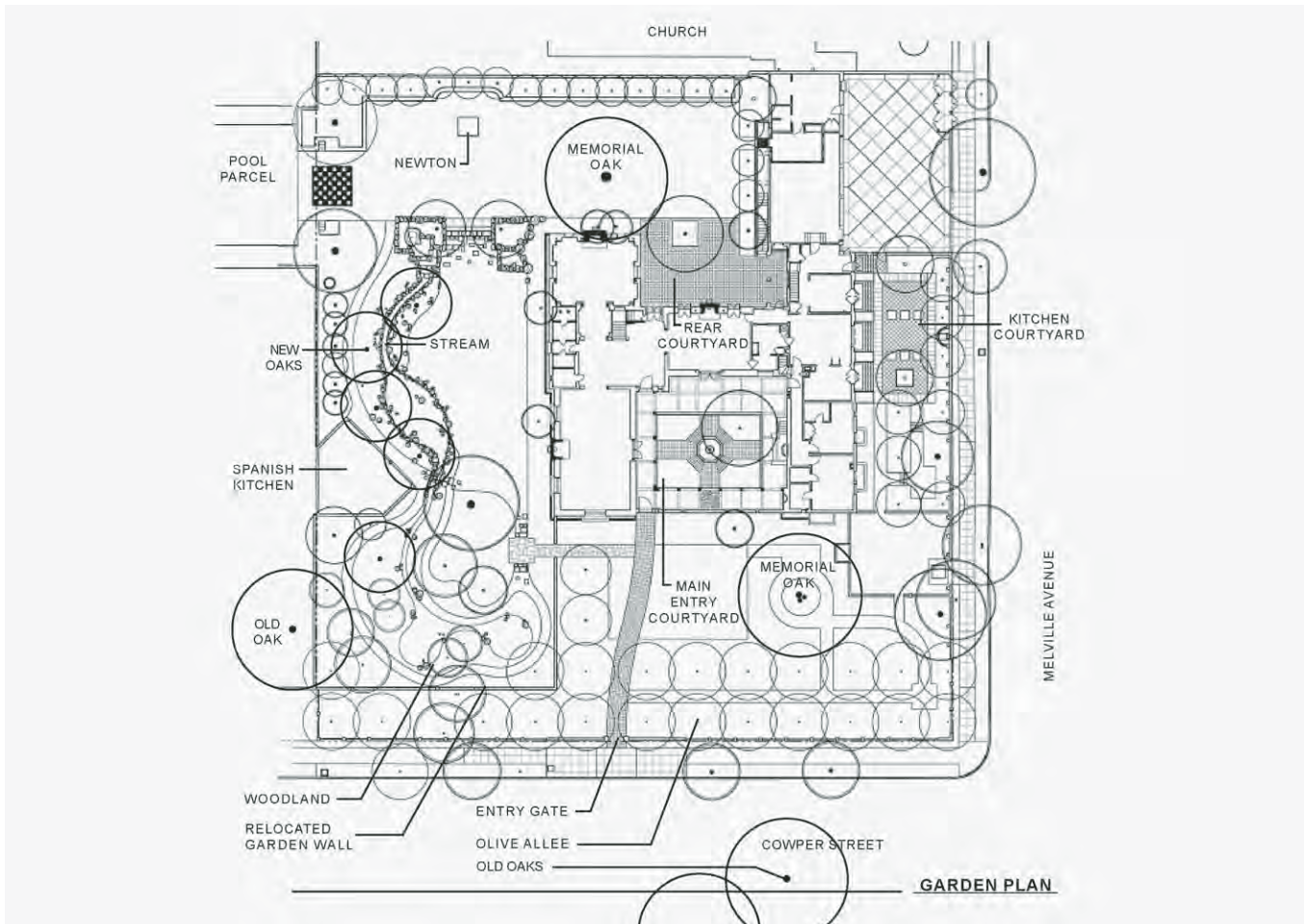
Clearly, the Norrises did not intend that their site developments would kill the very trees that had so inspired them. They were simply at the forefront of a twentieth-century culture, guided by comfort, fashion and myth, which valued the oak tree as a symbol while ignoring the ecological system that had created it.

Restoration: 1999 – Present

After Kathleen Norris sold the property in 1946 it changed hands several times before the Catholic Church finally bought it in 1949. A year later the church attached a chapel to one end of the house, and converted the house into a dormitory for priests. The church owned the property for the next fifty years, until a family with two young children and an interest in architectural heritage bought the house in 1999 with the intention of returning it to use as a single-family residence. They hired Tom Hardy, with Page & Turnbull of San Francisco, to restore and renovate the old building, and they hired John Northmore Roberts & Associates of Berkeley to design the gardens. It quickly became evident to these designers that the landscape and cultural heritage of the place was richer than that of the period associated with the National Register building.

In terms of the landscape, for more than half a century student priests had been in charge of maintaining its gardens, and the condition of these spaces had deteriorated markedly. However, the area within the garden walls had received more attention than that outside, and this pattern

By 1999, a dense cluster of mature young native oak trees, visible in the center of the photo, had formed in a neglected corner of the Cowper Street lot. It is likely the trees sprouted from acorns of the larger old tree visible on the neighboring property to the left. Photo by author.



had produced a most interesting consequence. Within the walls, the gardens had evolved into an easily maintained combination of lawn and Algerian ivy with remnant trees and a few ornamental shrubs. Meanwhile, the more remote spaces outside the wall had been increasingly neglected and become a haven for a mix of weedy plants.

More importantly, during the long period of church occupancy, a small native oak woodland with some undergrowth had reestablished itself across property lines, as it might have in pre-European times. The trees sprouted from acorns dropped from nearby ancient trees and “planted” by squirrels. By 1999 a dense cluster of new trees had formed, with the oldest about forty years of age. The woodland was scruffy, with some exotic vegetation — but it was flourishing. Its presence provided a clue to how the new gardens might be structured. This could follow what Mark Francis and Andreas Reimann have called “an eco-

logically sustainable garden.”¹² Working with, rather than against, the site’s natural ecology, historically significant features could be restored, new uses established, and the layers of human influence more fully acknowledged.

Three general principles today form the basis for the redesign of the Norris House gardens. First has been to establish the place of the garden within its authentic landscape. This has involved recognizing and expanding the existing oak ecosystem and facilitating its future extension to adjacent properties. Second has been to restore and enhance the historically significant courtyards of the National Register building. Third has been to design new outdoor spaces that will serve the needs of the young, active new owners.

The landscape plan also attempts to preserve the site’s two remaining memorial oaks to the extent possible. These trees are in decline, but the new garden plan minimizes

irrigation in their root zones and replaces lawn and weedy undergrowth with compatible native plants and permeable surfaces. At the same time, plantings of new native oaks and understory shrubs along the length of the lot have extended the woodland, created a new natural setting for the rest of the gardens, and reinforced an ecological link with neighboring lots.



The Gardens as a Whole

The history of the grounds at the Norris house reflects the complexity of interaction between human groups and their surroundings. Successive inhabitants have imprinted their cultural values on the place with particular respect to

Opposite: Plan of the new gardens on the site by John Northmore Roberts & Associates.

Left: Norris House entry courtyard in 1929. The house was conceived as a courtyard home with an easy flow between indoor and outdoor spaces, shady overhangs, rich tile work, fountains, and lush plantings. Photo by Burton Crandall, courtesy Palo Alto Historical Association.

Right: The main entry courtyard was restored in 2001 to reflect the historic character of the National Register building. A madrone tree has replaced the oak that died, tile-work and the fountain were restored, and the planting beds are filled with herbs. Photo by author.

its trees. At the same time, the oak woodland has evolved at its own pace, responding to the imperatives of underlying ecological processes as well as the varied human interventions.

In the early twentieth century the Norrises were part of a culture that idealized its landscape and modified specific features of it to match their romantic notions of life in early



California. These were different features than those that had held commercial appeal for its former rancho residents, or that had served the subsistence or spiritual needs of Native American residents before that.

Today, under its present ownership a new shift has taken place. Among other things, this new perception of landscape value reflects interest in natural systems which transcend private property lines, blurring traditional European-based distinctions between the commons and private lands. In this regard, the current redesign suggests elegant and environmentally sound ways of designing for intimate human use while linking to broader ecological patterns.

One curious result is that Kathleen's unusual "Spanish Kitchen," originally a garden structure at the edge of a lawn, is now a pavilion set into a wooded garden (which in turn is part of a larger forest). The majestic oak tree that

towers over all here sprouted before Europeans arrived, and it has survived centuries of change. Today it offers a glimpse of the original setting for the house beneath it, which was designed to remind us of an earlier era. Meanwhile, the back of the chapel in the distance reflects the fifty years of church ownership, and the lawns between are a remnant of a century and a half of urbanization.

The redesign of this garden is located squarely within the ecologically conscious culture that has been emerging in California since the 1960s. This garden is the conceptual offspring of such seminal California projects as the Sea Ranch, which aspire to blend human habitation with protection of living natural systems. But in this case it is done at the scale of a single home. As Francis and Reimann have pointed out, "... the designed landscapes around our homes and community spaces can become the crucible of an environmentally sound and culturally expressive world."¹³

The new garden design does not try to re-create a pre-European or Rancho-era landscape, or even fully restore the gardens of the Norris years. Nor does it attempt to create a radically new place for the new inhabitants. Instead, it tries to find a new and mutually supportive balance among the forces that have shaped this landscape. For the first time in centuries, the underlying ecological system has deliberately been encouraged to reassert itself and to structure the way this site is used.

Notes

1. Ann Douglas wrote as follows about Kathleen Norris in her 1995 book *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920's* (New York: Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux): "Kathleen Norris was the most interesting novelist of feminine and matriarchal sentimentalist essentialism in the 1910s and 1920s; vastly popular, with a curious literary style that seems to owe a good deal to Henry James, she developed the themes that would dominate the soaps of early radio, aroused the ire (and perhaps envy) of Dorothy Parker, was adored by Alexander Wollcott (always a fan of the matriarch), and took care of Elinor Wylie's stepchildren (they were related by marriage); forgotten today, she is well worth in-depth study. Of particular interest are her novels *Joselyn's Wife* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1918), in which the heroine is a potent emblem of "wizardry"; *Martie the Unconquered* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1917), whose heroine is robust, wide-eyed, and extremely ambitious; *Harriet and the Piper* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1920), a tale of eminent upward mobility via marriage; *Second Hand Wife* (1932), a study of heroic feminine self-sacrifice; and *Beauty's Daughter* (1935), a fictionalized manual on how-to-hold-your-man that contains Norris's richest character study in the heroine's mother, Magda, an aging, acerbic, colorful ex-actress."

2. Page & Turnbull, Inc., "1247 Cowper Street, Palo Alto, 'La Casa Abierta,'" Historic Resource Study, San Francisco, CA, 2000.

3. Birge Clark, "Comments on the Charles and Kathleen Norris Residence and How

It Was Planned," correspondence to Palo Alto Historical Society, Nov. 14, 1974.

4. Kathleen Norris, "Spanish House," *Country Life*, March 1929, pp. 40-43.

5. Alfred Kroeber, as cited in Bruce M. Pavlik, Pamela C. Muick, Sharon Johnson, and Marjorie Pepper, *Oaks of California* (Los Olivos, CA: Cachuma Press and the California Oak Foundation, 1991), p. 96.

6. David C. Streatfield, *California Gardens: Creating a New Eden* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994), pp. 31-35.

7. Ward Winslow and the Palo Alto Historical Association, *Palo Alto: A Centennial History* (Palo Alto, CA: Palo Alto Historical Association, 1993), p. 40.

8. Helen Hunt Jackson, *Ramona* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1884).

9. Norris, "Spanish House," p. 40.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

11. Streatfield, *California Gardens*, pp. 44-45.

12. Mark Francis and Andreas Reimann, *The California Landscape Garden: Ecology, Culture, and Design* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 86.

13. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

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