

DUNSMUIR HISTORIC ESTATE  
(Dunsmuir House and Garden)  
2960 Peralta Oaks Court  
Oakland  
Alameda County  
California

HALS CA-21  
CA-21

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

# HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

## DUNSMUIR HISTORIC ESTATE

### (Dunsmuir House and Garden)

HALS NO. CA-21

Location: 2960 Peralta Oaks Court, Oakland, Alameda, CA  
Lat: 37.74395 Long: -122.14446

Significance: Dunsmuir Historic Estate is a turn-of-the-century mansion and estate first built by Alexander Dunsmuir, son of wealthy coal baron Robert Dunsmuir and later owned by I.W. Hellman, Jr. son of the founder of the Farmer's and Merchants Bank and later, owned Nevada National Bank, which merged with Wells Fargo. John McLaren, then the superintendent of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, is believed to have helped design the estate during the Hellman era.

History: Once part of one the largest land grants in California to Luis Maria Peralta, the original 106-acre estate's main products were cattle used for their hides and tallow for candles. The eastern portion of 9,416 acres was given to Ignacio, one of Peralta's four sons. In 1856, 508 acres was deeded to William Souther and Ellis A Haines and a portion of that property became a working farm (Souther Farm). Senator Edward Tompkins, the first University of California regent and a benefactor of UC Berkeley, purchased the property in 1868. He died in 1872 and the estate was left to his son, Gilbert Tompkins, an editor of the San Leandro Reporter. His interests in fruit culture and horse breeding lead to a fruit orchard, canning operation, and horse training grounds. Josephine Wallace (Alexander Dunsmuir's future wife) was a cousin of the Tompkins family and often visited the estate as a child.

In 1878, Alexander Dunsmuir, son of Robert Dunsmuir, a wealthy coal baron from Victoria, British Columbia, came to the San Francisco Bay Area to oversee his father's business. In 1899, he purchased the Souther Farm in San Leandro and recorded the deed in the Josephine's name. The estate showcased fruit orchards, a race track, and remnants of Spanish rancho days. In the same year, he hired architect Joshua Eugene Freeman who designed a three-story, 37-room Colonial Revival mansion as a wedding. In early 1900, while on their honeymoon in New York, Alexander died and Josephine returned alone to San Leandro. Eighteen months after his death, Josephine died of cancer in June 1901.

Isaias W. Hellman, Jr. purchased the estate in 1906 and renamed it Oakvale Park; the estate served as a summer home and his family and housed their growing European acquisitions. Mr. Hellman is the son of the founder of the Farmer's and Merchant Bank, (predecessor to today's Security Pacific National Bank), president of Nevada Bank of San Francisco (which later merged with Wells

Fargo) and founder of Union Trust of San Francisco. In 1913, the mansion was remodeled to accommodate the Hellmans' growing family and their European acquisitions. It is believed John McLaren, then the superintendent of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, assisted the Hellmans in their estate garden's designs although no documentation has been found to confirm this. He is accredited with various parts of estate's landscape (circa 1912) including the entry drive, landscape area west of the house, the east meadow, water cistern, and electric plant. McLaren's work may have done informally via site visits and Florence Hellman (Mr. Hellman's daughter), an avid gardener, likely knew and applied his design principles with her gardeners. McLaren's influence can be seen in various landscape elements, including the entry drive, a landscaped area west of the house, simplified east meadow, water cistern, and an electric plant. The estate grounds featured a variety of tree species, including: *Araucaria araucana*/bunya-bunya or monkey puzzle trees; *Carpinus caroliniana*/American hornbeam trees; and *Ulmus glabra* 'camperdownii'/Camperdown elms.

In addition to the landscape elements above, the Hellmans added other landscaping and recreational amenities to the property: a water system, paved tennis courts, a large lath house for begonias, a glass conservatory with a grotto for tropical plants, orchid house and cold houses for seedlings, a pool terrace with Mediterranean revival bathhouse in 1917 by architect Fredrick Meyer, a children's log cabin playhouse, a Japanese garden, a formal maze, a golf course, a mushroom house, well-kept vegetable gardens, an aviary, cow barn and dairy, and chicken houses. Later, the Dinkelspiel house was added for Florence Hellman and her husband, Lloyd Dinkelspiel. White gravel covered the boxwood hedge-lined paths; red rock lined the roads.

After Mr. Hellman's death in 1920, Mrs. Hellman retained the estate where she and her children and grandchildren spent summers until 1959.

In the early 1960s, the City of Oakland purchased the estate with plans to create a conference center. When these plans failed, a non-profit organization (Dunsmuir House & Gardens, Inc.) DHGI was created to preserve and restore the estate. The estate is owned the City of Oakland and managed by DHGI. In June 1989, DHGI was given full responsibility for operating the 50-acre estate as an educational, historical, cultural, and horticultural resource.

On May 19, 1972, the U.S. Department of the Interior designated Dunsmuir mansion a national historic site and listed it in the National Register of Historic Places (Building Number 72000214). The City of Oakland designated the mansion and carriage house as City historic landmarks.