

TOR HOUSE
(Robinson Jeffers House)
26304 Ocean View Avenue
Carmel-by-the-Sea
Monterey County
California

HALS CA-56
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
PACIFIC WEST REGIONAL OFFICE
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HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

TOR HOUSE

HALS NO. CA-56

Location: 26304 Ocean View Avenue, Carmel, Monterey County, CA, 93923, (831) 624-1813. Robinson Jeffers Tor House Foundation, Carol Dixon, Administrative Assistant. Latitude: 36.542069 Longitude: -121.932308 (East facade of house, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84).

Significance: Tor House is significant because of its association with poet Robinson Jeffers who was a world renowned poet in the early 20th century. The property is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Description: Originally the property encompassed 16 lots on Carmel Point, a land mass that projects out into Carmel Bay southwest of the town of Carmel-By-The-Sea on the Monterey peninsula. The current property occupies two standard lots – one on which the compound is built and the other to the west between the compound and bay. At the street frontage there is a modern wood and ornamental iron fence. A driveway leads down to what was originally used as a rumpus room for the Jeffers sons when they were in college, and now serves as a gift shop and tour office. From the driveway one can see much of the garden and the bay beyond.

A stone wall defines a courtyard space that also connects the Tor House, Hawk Tower, the dining room, and the rumpus room/office. Originally the wall, built by Robinson Jeffers (starting in 1921), was about 30 inches high on all sides with columns at the gates that are about 36 inches high. Jeffers placed Native American stone mortars on top of these columns and at the corner of the wall on the ocean side. The wall height on the ocean side was raised to approximately 6 feet, by one of the Jeffers twin sons, in order to provide more privacy. Originally, these walls were built to contain the family goats and the space within the courtyard appears to have been utilitarian. Today, brick paths between the buildings and a colorful, perennial garden have been added. Jeffers built a stone path between the Tor House and Hawk Tower that remains.

The stone used and the style of construction is the same as what was used to construct the buildings and structures in the compound. It is a rough Santa Lucia granite. It is clear where the son raised the height of the wall on the ocean side of the compound because he used smaller stones – there is a distinct change in texture in the wall here. There is one simple wooden picket gate in the wall that leads to a path on the ocean side of Tor House. This was known as the “sea gate” and the other gate, on the opposite side of the courtyard was the “moor gate”.

Just inside the gate, in the garden at the southwest corner of the compound there is a stone pedestal set on a stone foundation, with a sundial on it. This was

Robinson Jeffers first solo effort of masonry construction.

Another wall runs parallel to the path that leads into the garden. This wall is low – about 18 inches high. It defines a small garden area that is separate from other spaces in the yard. One steps over a low stone and onto a slate path that leads to a door. The stones used to construct these walls and the buildings came from the site and surrounding area. A pony was used to pull stones up from the beach below. The Jeffers also brought stones back from their travels and friends and admirers brought them stones from around the world that were mortared into these structures.

The entire complex of buildings and garden is strongly tied to the landscape. Robinson and Una Jeffers chose to build their home at this site because it was located on a small knoll with a circle of stones known as a Tor. They instructed their contractor to anchor their new home to one of the Tor stones and they designed the home with a window that looks out towards the ocean with the tor stone in the foreground. Another element of the landscape is a stone bench, made from a single slab of granite that is integrated into the Tor stone and house.

In addition to his passion for poetry and masonry Robinson Jeffers planted some 2000 trees on and around his property – Monterey cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) and southern blue gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*). Some of these remain today lining Ocean Avenue, and in the neighborhood that has developed. Other plantings on the property appear to be modern additions though there has been an attempt to maintain the character of the original landscape on the downhill parcel where wildflowers and oat grass grow. The oat grass is a remnant of the feed given to the pony that pulled the stone up from the beach. Una Jeffers recorded 45 species of wildflowers found at the site. There is also a common yew (*Taxus baccata*) within the courtyard that could date to the Jeffers.

Another historic remnant in the garden is the presence of broken abalone shell in the soil. The Jeffers discovered this material in the soil when they first purchased the property. They also commented on finding shell middens left by Native Americans that had inhabited the area and included shell fish in their diet. They also found chips of chert used as tools, and fire stains on rocks left from the native people's occupation.

History: The Jeffers had planned to move to England after they married in 1913 but the outbreak of WWI prevented them from doing so. A friend suggested they spend time in Carmel where they rented a small, wooden cottage in town in 1914. They took long walks out to the beach and found themselves attracted to the small knoll with the tor stones and expansive view of the ocean and Point Lobos beyond.

They purchased the property and hired M.J. Murphy contractor to build their

home. Jeffers hired himself out as a laborer to the mason, which is how he learned the trade. Jeffers had inherited \$10,000 and used that to purchase the property and build Tor House. Otherwise, he supported his family from his poetry having thirteen published books. They moved in to Tor House in 1919 when their twin sons Garth and Donnan were three years old.

Robinson Jeffers was born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania in 1887 and died January 20, 1962 on a day that it snowed at Tor House – an extremely rare occurrence. Una Jeffers died in 1950.

Sources: Site visit, July 12, 2010.

David Ohanesian, Tor House docent, June 12, 2010.

Jeffers, Donnan Call. *The Building of Tor House*. Tor House Press, 1993.

Jeffers, Donnan. *The Stones of Tor House*. Jeffers Literary Properties, 1985.

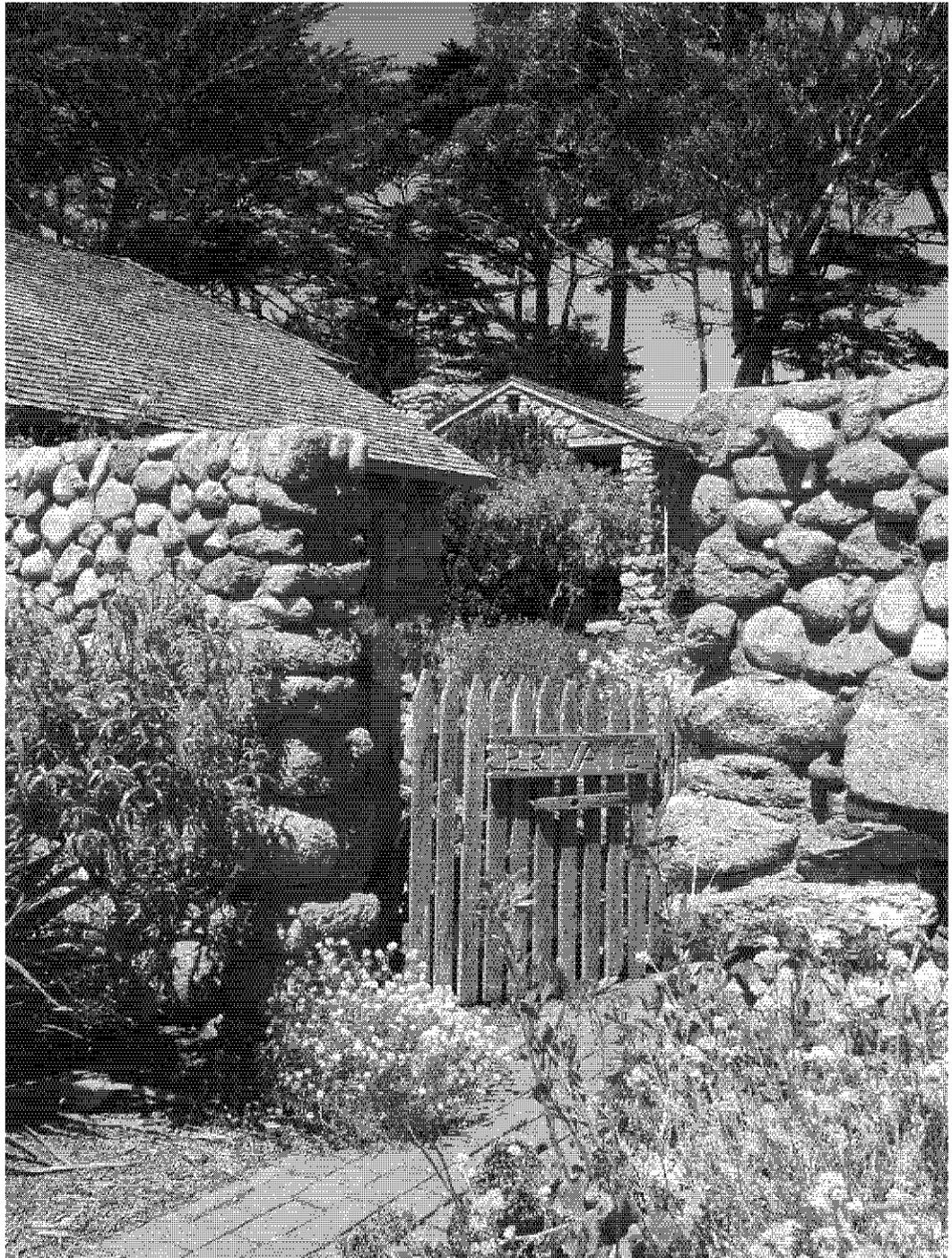
Historian: Chris Pattillo, Historic Landscape Architect, PGAdesign
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June 28, 2010



The Jeffers compound with Hawk Tower on the left, Tor House on the right, the courtyard wall with the sea gate and ocean view beyond (Chris Pattillo, June 12, 2010). In the foreground are the gate columns with the mortar stones on top.



Some of the remaining Monterey cypress trees that Robinson Jeffers planted on the property (Chris Pattillo, June 2010). The iron fence in the foreground is on the Tor House property.



The sea gate in the stonewall – lower portion with larger stones built by Robinson Jeffers and upper portion with smaller stones built by one of his sons (Chris Pattillo, June 12, 2010). Tor House at the left, rumpus room in the background and Jeffers' cypress trees in back.



Northwest corner of Tor House built onto one of the original tor stones with the granite slab bench at the back of the house facing the sea (Chris Pattillo, June 12, 2010).