

NIVEN NURSERY  
2 Ward Street  
Larkspur  
Marin County  
California

HABS CA-2867  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

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

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### NIVEN NURSERY

HABS No. CA-2867

- Location: 2 Ward Street, Larkspur, Marin County, California.
- Present Owner: New Home Company
- Present Use: The former nursery complex and residence are abandoned and slated for redevelopment; the buildings will be demolished.
- Significance: The Niven Nursery complex is significant in the history of twentieth century commercial nursery development. Begun by the Niven family in the 1920s, with expansion of the property and its operations from the 1930s to the 1980s. The complex represents early business development in the 1920s in the City of Larkspur. According to Mr. Hill's 2000 report, the Niven Nursery was the only commercial nursery operating in the City of Larkspur. The buildings are significant because of the connection to James Niven, a pioneering member of the City of Larkspur and an important member of the Northern California commercial nursery industry. The buildings represent greenhouse design dating from the 1920s to the 1950s in Marin County and the larger surrounding area. As the industry changed over the twentieth century, most of the commercial nurseries changed operations or ceased to operate. The Niven Nursery buildings represent the dwindling stock of these early commercial nursery operations.
- Historian: Kathleen A. Crawford, Architectural Historian and Carrie D. Wills, Senior Project Archaeologist, Michael Brandman Associates, 2633 Camino Ramon, San Ramon, CA; September 2011.

The following sections are excerpted from *Historic and Architectural Assessment of the Niven Nursery, 2 Ward Street, Larkspur, CA., Ward Hill, April 2000.*

### **Historical Context – Marin County**

Marin County was one of the original 27 counties created by the California legislature in 1850, and the City of San Rafael has always been Marin's county seat (Hoover & Rensch 1990). Given the accessibility problems resulting from the County's mountainous terrain, the earliest Marin towns such as Sausalito and San Quentin were located on San Francisco Bay and served by ferries from San Francisco. The development of the more remote interior areas of Marin occurred much later when the County's first railroad system was built during the 1870s. One historian of Marin County wrote in 1880 that "of all the means which tend to cause rapid settlement" none produces the "quick results" that the railroad does (Munro-Fraser 1880). The first railroad in Marin County, known as the "Bobtail" connecting San Quentin to San Rafael, opened in 1870 (Rousselin 1990). In 1873, construction began on the North Pacific Coast Railroad that ran from Sausalito through Mill Valley; what is today Larkspur, San Anselmo, Fairfax, and the San Geronimo Valley; and up Tomales Bay to Cazadero (Stindt 1976). A 1,250-foot railroad tunnel was bored through White's Hill for the North Pacific Coast line (Marin Planning Department 1978). The first train operated from the Sausalito ferry terminal to Cazadero on January 7, 1875, thus providing the first transportation link from the County's interior to San Francisco (Stindt 1976). The Southern Pacific Railroad purchased the North Pacific Coast line.

During the nineteenth century, the railroad stimulated the growth of dairy farms and lumber mills in the mid-1870s (Marin Planning Department 1978). Noting the large number of dairy farms in Marin by 1880, a county history produced that year boasted that there is "no better dairy country in the world than Sonoma and Marin counties in this state" (Munro-Fraser 1880). The railroad provided dairy farmers with an economical means of transporting their raw milk to a creamery for processing. Another major industry in Marin County stimulated by the railroad was recreation. Beginning in the 1870s, a number of summer resorts and picnic or camping areas developed along the railroad line. In 1884, the Camp Taylor Hotel opened on Lagunitas Creek; an 1892 newspaper article noted that during the summer "the borders of Lagunitas Creek" were also lined with the tents of campers visiting the area (Mason 1975). The railroad itself became a popular attraction during the summer for San Francisco residents who took scenic tours to Tomales Bay (Mason 1975). Marin's grandest resort opened in San Rafael in 1886: the 400 room Hotel Rafael, a 21-acre development with stables, swimming pools and tennis courts, burned in 1928 (Rousselin 1990). By 1904, Marin County was appropriately referred to as "the Playground of San Francisco" (Marin County Promotion League 1904).

The development of residential subdivisions in Marin County did not occur to any significant extent until the first decade of the twentieth century. The opening of the Northwestern Pacific interurban lines of electric trains in 1903, a fast and convenient commuter transit system, initially stimulated the growth of Marin's interior towns. The overall trip time from Lansdale station (in what is now San Anselmo) to San Francisco on the interurban train and the ferry was almost exactly one hour in 1908

(Livingston 1984). A more significant event that dramatically increased Marin's population in the early twentieth century was the 1906 earthquake. The devastation in San Francisco as a result of the earthquake and fire sent thousands of refugees fleeing into the surrounding suburbs, including Marin County. Although some of the refugees eventually returned to San Francisco, many stayed to become permanent Marin residents. Marin County's 1900 population of 15,702 increased over 60 percent after the 1906 earthquake (Arrigoni 1990). Given this influx of population, a number of new subdivisions were planned in various parts of the County. Despite the new development after the 1906 earthquake, by 1920, Marin was still a sparsely populated rural area with one-tenth of the population it has today.

The opening of the Redwood Highway and the substantial increase in automobile use during the 1920s set the stage for the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge during the 1930s. After the bridge opened in 1937, an increasing number of Marin residents drove to San Francisco to work and shop, rather than riding the interurban. As a result of declining patronage, the Northwestern Pacific Railroad applied to discontinue the interurban train and ferry service to San Francisco in 1939, and the entire system shut down in 1941. A bus system also owned by the Northwestern Pacific replaced the trains (Scott 1985). Although the anticipated growth in population in Marin County from building the Golden Gate bridge led to some real estate speculation in the 1930s and 1940s, the effect of both the depression and World War II delayed any substantial growth in the County until the 1950s (Scott 1985).

The post-war population and construction boom transformed south and east Marin County from a largely rural area of small towns, summer resorts, and farms into primarily a collection of commuter suburbs. During the war years alone, the population of the Bay Area increased 1.1 million to a total of 3 million people by 1950 (Demoro 1991), and Marin County's population increased 75 percent between 1950 and 1960 (Gebhard & Montgomery 1976). The new residential subdivisions of the 1950s and 1960s in Marin County also stimulated considerable commercial development, including the construction of several large shopping centers. Commercial development in the County predominated in the 1970s and 1980s when Marin also became a major suburban office center. Despite the rapid urbanization of east and south Marin, West Marin has been preserved (through a variety of legal mechanisms) as a sparsely populated agricultural and recreation area that is similar in many respects to what the entire county was like in the years before World War II.

### **City of Larkspur**

The City of Larkspur was originally part of two Mexican land grants: Rancho Corte Madera del Presidio, granted to John Reed in 1834 and Rancho Punta de Quentin (Point San Quentin to Ross Valley), granted to John Cooper in 1840. An Irishman, Reed received his grant for the sawmill he operated that supplied lumber to the Presidio (Stafford 1999). The ranchos in California's Mexican period typically raised herds of cattle for tallow and hides.

In the early American period, Larkspur was primarily a lumber town. The Baltimore and Frederick Trading and Mining Company started a private sawmill in Larkspur during the Gold Rush years to

supply building materials to rapidly growing city of San Francisco. Barges hauled the lumber down Corte Madera Creek and on to San Francisco. After the forests were cut by the late 1850s, ranching and dairying became main livelihood of the early settlers in the Larkspur area. Early ranchers in the area included Patrick King, William Murray, and Jonathan Brickerstaff, who in 1852 built the first house in what later became Larkspur. The Brickerstaff house was on a knoll just north of the Niven Nursery.

Charles W. Wright purchased the King dairy ranch, and his development company, the American Land and Trust Company of San Francisco, hired engineer M.C. Ward to survey the original Larkspur town plat in November 1887.<sup>1</sup> Wright built five cottages in the new town in an effort to get the North Pacific Coast Railroad to open a station in the town. Wright's wife named the town Larkspur after the wild flower. Larkspur's main street was laid out as part of the original plat.<sup>2</sup> Wright developed the town as a summer resort, building the 80-room Larkspur Inn in 1891 (which burned in 1896), and the Hotel Merwin (later the Hotel Larkspur, then today's Blue Rock Inn) in 1895. Larkspur's first churches and schools were also built in the 1895–1896 period.

The 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco sent a flood of refugees to the surrounding counties, including Marin. Approximately 200 families came to Larkspur, many of them summer tent residents (Stafford 1999). Many of the refugees became permanent residents. Larkspur's population increase likely prompted the town's incorporation on March 1, 1908. The 1910 population of 594 increased to 1,250 during the summer resort season. A new Mission Revival Style city hall designed by C.O. Claussen was constructed in 1913.

Larkspur changed from an isolated rural community and summer resort to a suburban area after the Golden Gate Bridge was constructed in 1937 and the huge increase in Bay Area population during the World War II years that continued into the 1950s. Highway 101 was also completed in conjunction with the building of the Golden Gate Bridge. The War redistributed urban populations from the northeastern cities of the United States to the newer urban centers in the south and west. Early Larkspur residential subdivisions include Chevy Chase in 1937, Heather Gardens in 1942, and Hillview Gardens in 1955. Since World War II, the area of Larkspur has grown through a number of annexations: Greenbrae in 1949 and 1952, and parts of the San Quentin Peninsula (known as Larkspur Landing) was annexed in 1968 and 1972. With these annexations, Larkspur's population has grown to 12,100 in recent years.

### **History of the Bay Area Nursery Business**

After Mexico seceded from Spain in 1822, the development of private ranchos began in California. Commercial agriculture and ranching first developed in California with the granting of land to private citizens. California ranchos during the Mexican Period raised large herds of cattle for their tallow and

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<sup>1</sup> The original 1887 "Map of the Town of Larkspur" is pictured opposite page 1 of Larkspur Past & Present, Larkspur Heritage Committee.

<sup>2</sup> The main highway through Southern Marin created in 1909 ran from Bridgeway in Sausalito to Miller Avenue in Mill Valley, over Camino Alto in Corte Madera, to Magnolia in Larkspur north to Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. The road was paved in 1913.

hides. The tallow and hides were bartered for other items needed on the rancho. Commercial agriculture was limited by the small size of the market in California and the difficulty of getting products to the small domestic market that did exist (Jelinek 1979). Consequently, commercial nurseries were not established until after California became a United States territory in 1848.

Like many who came to California to strike it rich in the Gold Rush, early nurserymen were often miners who turned to agriculture after becoming discouraged. In the early years of the Gold Rush, San Francisco and Sacramento, with by far the largest populations in California, were the main centers of economic activity. A.P. Smith started one of the earliest nurseries on land purchased east of Sacramento from John Sutter in 1848. Smith cultivated fruit trees, shrubs, and vines, in addition to a variety of ornamental plants. By 1857, Smith's extensive operation had 12,000 rose plants, 2,000 camellias, and over 1,000 varieties of other plants (Van Laan 1990). Smith's nursery closed in the 1860s.

In 1850, pioneer nurseryman Colonel James Warren sold fruit trees, ornamental trees, and flowers in Sacramento after losing his gold fever. A great influence in the early years of the State's horticulture, Warren published one of the first nursery catalogs in 1853 and organized the California State Agriculture Society in 1854. Many of the earliest Bay Area nurseries were in the South of Market area of San Francisco. One of the earliest was William Walker's 3.5-acre Golden Gate Nursery at Folsom and 4<sup>th</sup> streets in San Francisco. In 1854, Walker had several greenhouses for growing "flowering plants, ornamental shrubs and shade trees." By 1860, Walker had 250 varieties of roses, and his 1858 catalog listed many greenhouse plants. A block from Walker's nursery, William and James O'Donnell started the United States Nursery in 1854. The O'Donnell brothers won an 1856 award from the agricultural society for best garden in California. A number of commercial nurseries were also developed in the vicinity of Mission Dolores.

Alameda County also developed as an early center for the nursery business. In 1855, James Shinn opened his nursery in the Niles area (now part of Fremont). Shinn wrote extensively about horticulture, developed many varieties of fruit and ornamental plants, and founded the State Horticultural Society. Shinn became one of the most famous nurserymen in California in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. James Shinn's son, Charles, a renown nurseryman himself, continued to operate the famous nursery, which with the California Nursery Company north of Niles played an important role in providing young trees to new commercial fruit growers. The Shinn House and grounds in Fremont is a Historic Park listed on the National Register of Historic Places. A community of largely French nurserymen became established in San Jose in the 1850s. Antone Delmas and Louis Prevost were among the most prominent who developed fruit trees and vineyard stock for early growers and winemakers in Santa Clara County (Sullivan 1982).

Since nurseries served only a local market, as more nurseries opened, overproduction and falling prices led to many businesses closing in the early 1860s. The late 1860s, however, was a major turning point for the industry. After the completion of the transcontinental railroad in September 1869, the agricultural economy changed from grain to fruit cultivation, thus creating a substantial new

demand for nurserymen who developed tree stock. The railroad opened a tremendous new market for California fruit. In almost every area in the County served by adequate rail transportation, the big grain ranches were subdivided into small, family-run orchards. One author has noted that this “agricultural revolution” resulted in “the vine and the tree entirely engrossing the attention of farmers” (Scott 1985). The railroad provided a way to get fruit to market while still fresh, and improvements in refrigerated rail cars made it possible to ship fresh produce longer distances. The development of the canning industry also created new methods of preserving and storing for later consumption (Braznell 1982).

Founded by John Rock in 1865 in Cupertino, the California Nursery Company bought over 500 acres north of Niles in 1884 and eventually moved the company to this location in 1888. Rock was considered the most famous nurseryman in the State along with James Shinn. In 1936, an article in the *California Nurseryman* pointed out that “the experimental work carried on at Niles [by the California Nursery Company] was one of the most important contributions to the development of commercial fruit production in the state of California” (Sandoval 1985). According to a 1914 history of Alameda County, “hundreds of orchards in this part of the State were supplied from [the California Nursery Company],” which grew to be the largest nursery in California (Baker 1914). Still in business today near Niles, the Roeding family (pioneers in the Fresno nursery business) has owned the California Nursery Company since 1917. (The property is designated a Primary Historic Resource by the City of Fremont.) No greenhouses survive on the California Nursery Company property.

The expansion of the nursery industry beginning in the 1870s continued unabated into the 1880s, possibly gaining in momentum. The fruit growing industry was by far the most important aspect of this growth, and the fastest growth was in Southern California when the citrus industry took off in the early 1880s. In 1881, the Governor signed a bill authorizing the appointment of County Boards of Horticultural Commissions to protect and promote the interests of the industry. By 1882, 21 counties had appointed commissions that played an active role in promoting the State’s nurseries.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the nursery business slowed down. A deep recession hit the country in the early 1890s and the large number of orchards planted in the previous years reduced demand for new plantings. Nurseries were finding it necessary to make changes in their sales approach. Ornamentals such as roses, perennials, shrubs, and vines kept many nurseries solvent. There was a new interest in planting olive trees in parts of the State where the land was too poor or dry for other fruit.

A major Bay Area nursery started in the Bay Area during the 1890s was Sherwood Hall. Timothy Hopkins, the adopted son of Mark Hopkins (co-founder of the Central Pacific Railroad), invested part of the considerable wealth inherited from his mother in developing the Sherwood Hall Nursery on his Menlo Park property. He built 25 greenhouses and planted over 200 acres of fruit trees and flowers for the nursery. Hopkins specialized in raising sweet peas and was a pioneer in popularizing the sweet pea in California (Van Laan 1990). Renamed the Sunset Seed and Plant Company after

establishing a headquarters in San Francisco, the company became the largest seed farm and nursery in the western United States. Plants and seeds produced by Sunset Seed and Plant won awards at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and at the 1894 Midwinter Fair in San Francisco (Anonymous, August 1894; Anonymous, June 1895). The site of Hopkins' Nursery is today the Stanford Research Institute and the campus of the United States Geological Survey.

### **The Twentieth Century**

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw continued expansion of the nursery business in the Bay Area. The rapidly growing cities of San Francisco and the Oakland/Berkeley forced the pioneer nurseries to move south to less developed, primarily agricultural areas. The industry concentrated in areas with temperate weather adjacent to San Francisco Bay in southern Alameda County from San Leandro to Fremont and the San Francisco Peninsula from Colma to Mountain View. According to one writer, the "dozens of nurseries small and large" formed "a slender green backbone to the economies of Alameda and San Mateo counties" (Ferris 1997). As late as the 1960s, there were still about 100 nurserymen in southern Alameda County, about half of whom were first-generation Japanese (Holzmeister 2000).

In the early 1900s, E.W. McLellan had 13 mammoth greenhouses in Burlingame, the "largest, most modern greenhouses west of Chicago," producing 200,000 roses a month (Ferris 1997). McLellan moved his nursery to South San Francisco in the 1920s (later known as Rod McLellan "Acres of Orchids"). During 1903, the town of Colma alone had 30 nurseries. The nursery business in Marin County was considerably smaller compared with the counties to the south. The 1925 Marin County Directory listed only seven nurseries—James Niven's Larkspur Nursery was the only one listed in Larkspur; the other nurseries included three in San Rafael, three in San Anselmo, and one in Kentfield. The number of nurseries listed in the Marin County Directory increased to 12 by 1939.

After the lean years during the Depression of the 1930s and World War II, nurseries in the Bay Area rebounded in the 1940s. Prior to World War II, the flower industry in California was confined to a relatively limited market, that is, the states near the Pacific Coast. Shipment by air was not common and only the hardiest plants could be shipped by rail to the eastern United States. The flower industry flourished in the 1940s with the population boom in California, and improved aircraft service in the early 1950s enabled nurseries to expand their markets.

The introduction of jet aircraft in the early 1960s opened the nursery industry to a truly international market. Conversely, the availability of cheaper and faster air transportation also brought more intense foreign competition. Nevertheless, even as late as the early 1980s, Alameda County was home to a record 10.11 million square feet of greenhouses. However, during the ensuing 20 years, development pressures and fierce competition from South American producers, particularly Columbia and Ecuador, has largely forced nurseries out of the core Bay Area counties. The number of wholesale nurseries in Alameda County has dwindled from 82 in 1950 to about 30 today (Ferris 1997). Only about a dozen nurseries survive in the older San Leandro to Fremont growing area (more modern operations have started in the Pleasanton/Livermore area). Virtually all of the major nurseries have closed in eastern San

Mateo County. Some nurseries moved to Half Moon Bay, where a viable industry still survives<sup>3</sup>. Half Moon Bay has so far been protected from development by lack of access and potable water, and zoning restrictions. In 1996, the last three wholesale nurseries in South San Francisco (Delano, Silva Terrace, and Geminagni) closed and the land was developed for residences (Ferris 1997). Also in South San Francisco, the famous Rod McLellan nursery closed in 1998 and its greenhouses were removed. McLellan still has a retail outlet in San Mateo, but now grows its flowers in Watsonville (Marvel 2000). A number of nurseries have also moved to Sonoma County.

### **Niven Nursery**

The Niven Nursery buildings are located on a 17.9-acre, flat, irregularly shaped parcel just east of the historic commercial center of the City of Larkspur. The parcel's boundaries include Ward Street and a small creek on the south, and Dougherty Drive on the north. A number of medium-size trees are near the creek. A neighborhood shopping center at Magnolia Avenue and Doherty Drive is adjacent to the northwest corner of the parcel. The buildings occupy the western half of the parcel. The eastern half is undeveloped except for the modern Sloat Nursery (on leased land) on Doherty Drive at the northeast corner of the parcel.

The nursery buildings were constructed during a 62-year period from 1921 to 1983. The exact date of construction or of later alterations of some buildings is not known. Building permits were not required until relatively recent years. In the past, depending on the nursery's demand, new buildings were constructed or old buildings were altered (Niven 2000). The nursery buildings are organized into three major groups shown on Figure 1: the west nursery area, the south nursery area, and the north nursery area.

### **The West Nursery**

The west nursery area includes 11 greenhouses, the lath house, a potting shed, boiler room, a warehouse, a storage building with an attached greenhouse for orchid breeding, and a modern open vehicle shed. Eight greenhouses are in an east/west row with three smaller, perpendicular greenhouses on the north. The greenhouses vary in length from approximately 50 to 180 feet in length and are about 20 feet wide. The west nursery includes the oldest greenhouses on the property. The west nursery also includes an early Niven family house and a roofing materials storage building (now extensively altered) used for George Niven's roofing business.

The greenhouses have a standard form and plan, e.g., a broad, gently pitched gable roof and a long rectangular plan. The roof and the upper section of the walls are glazed. The lower half of the exterior walls are clad with horizontal wood siding. The greenhouses are light wood-frame structures with a series of internal wood posts (some with side struts) set under wood rafters supporting the roof. Some greenhouses have structural steel tube posts supporting the roof. The rectangular shaped lights are held in wooden frames. The flowerpots were placed on the wooden benches running the length of the greenhouse.

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<sup>3</sup> Nursery crops in Half Moon Bay make up 82% of all crops in San Mateo County according to 1995 county crop reports (Ferris 1997:B-2).

According to the August 1924 Sanborn Fire Insurance map of the Niven property, the original nursery complex included two greenhouses, a house, and a roofing materials storage building. George Niven had a roofing business separate from the nursery operation (Niven 2000). Greenhouse 3 in the west nursery area was the first one built by James Niven (Niven 2000). A small room housing two boilers used for heating the greenhouses is at the east facade of greenhouse 2, sited perpendicular to greenhouse 3. The original section of the roofing materials warehouse has a cross gable roof with wide eaves with brackets. The building is stud-wall, wood-frame construction on a concrete foundation. The exterior walls are covered with rustic siding. The building has two groups of six light windows on the north facade and one on the east facade. The north facade also has a large, half-glazed sliding door. The 1942 Sanborn Map shows the roofing materials warehouse now has a large southern addition for a carpentry shop. This building is today used for storage. A greenhouse was added to the south facade of the carpentry shop around the 1950s for orchid breeding.

The rectangular plan, wood-frame house has a gabled roof with roof eaves of exposed rafters. The house has a high basement. A variety of dense foliage near the house obscures views of it from other parts of the property. The exterior walls are covered with clapboard siding. Wooden steps lead up to the central front entrance door on the west facade. Large six light windows flank the front door. The interior was not accessible.

By 1942, greenhouses 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and part of 9 had been constructed in the west nursery area. A potting shed is at the east end of greenhouse 6. Greenhouses 4 and 5 are similar in form to greenhouse 1, except greenhouse 4 has an open free span interior. A glazed extension on the south side of these greenhouses forms an enclosed walkway joining the buildings together. The northern half of greenhouse 6 has collapsed. Greenhouse 7 has a modern tube steel interior frame. Greenhouses 8 and 9 have a similar double-gable form with single, wooden, hinged entrance doors on the east facades. Both greenhouses also appear to have a taller, gabled addition extending from the west facade. Greenhouses 10 and 11 are a later addition to greenhouse 9. The lath house (west of greenhouses 9, 10, and 11) has collapsed and is now overgrown with foliage. Greenhouse 1 is also later construction, possibly dating from the late 1940s. The roofing materials warehouse adjacent to greenhouse 5 is a wood-frame building with a gently pitched gable roof. The walls are covered with rustic siding. The south and east facades have projecting loading areas covered by a shed roof. The open interior space is still used for storage.

Southeast of greenhouse 11 is a small house moved to this site from Ward Street in recent years. The wood-frame house has a gabled roof. The exterior walls have board and batten siding on the front and side facades, then clapboard siding on the rear facade. A glazed porch is at the west side of the front facade. A ca.1970 vehicle or open storage shed is just east of House 2.

### **South Nursery Area**

The South Nursery Area includes 11 greenhouses, 3 houses, and a water tank. The contiguous boiler room, office and a packing/shipping building are attached to the west facade of greenhouse 1. The South Nursery Area greenhouses were originally developed for a separate company from the orchid

growing operation in the West Nursery Area. This company originally specialized in growing gardenias, then roses. The 1942 Sanborn Map indicates the company was known as Niven, Sarrat & Lucas (previously Niven & Sarrat). Greenhouse 1 was developed first in 1939-40, than the adjacent greenhouses (to greenhouse 8) were built through the 1940s. A storage and boiler room was attached to greenhouse 1. Greenhouses 9, 10, and 11 were built in 1960s (Niven 2000). A later small greenhouse (1950s) was added perpendicular to and at the north façades of greenhouses 1 and 2.

The three houses in the South Nursery Area were constructed for workers as the company expanded in the 1940s and 1950s. The wood-frame House 3 has an irregular plan, a post and pier foundation and low-pitched gable roof covered with asphalt shingles. This house appears on the 1942 Sanborn Map. The condition of this house is quite deteriorated. The exterior walls are covered with clapboard and the house has wood-sash windows. The house has a recessed porch that wraps around from the east to the north facades. The main entrance door is on the east façade. Inside, the house has two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a living area.

Just east of House 3, House 4 is also a wood-frame structure with a gable roof. House 4 appears to date from the 1950s. The house has exterior rustic siding, and aluminum frame and wood-sash windows. The house appears to have a number of large additions to the west façade. The interior of this house was not accessible. East of house 4 is a small water tank constructed of wood slates held with steel tie bars. The water tank appears to date from the 1950s or 1960s.

House 5 is just north of the shipping/packing area. House 5 is a wood-frame structure with a rectangular plan and a gable roof. The roof has eaves with exposed rafters. The exterior walls are covered with unpainted horizontal boards (which appear to be quite deteriorated). The house has six over six, wood-sash, double-hung windows. The house has a high basement. Wooden steps lead up to the front door at the west side of the north façade. A second door is on the east façade. Inside, the house has two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a dining area along the back (south) and a living room, a bathroom and a kitchen arranged along the front of the house. This house is also shown on the 1942 Sanborn Map.

The boiler room, office and the packing/shipping area are an interrelated complex in a north/south orientation. The original storage/boiler room here was extensively expanded and rebuilt over time. The wood-frame boiler room is a story and half structure with a flat roof (an earlier gambrel roof section is on the east). The exterior walls are covered with horizontal wood siding. The west and north facades of the boiler room have banks of six over six, wood-sash, double-hung wings just below the roof eaves. The south façade has a sliding wood door and a pair of hinged doors. The west façade has one large hinged door.

North of the boiler room is the approximately 1980 nursery office. North of the office is the packing/shipping area, a wood-frame structure with a shed roof. The exterior walls are covered with horizontal wood siding. The packing/shipping area also has a group of six over six, double-hung, wood-sash windows on the west façade. The north façade has two hinged doors.

The greenhouses are lined up from east to west. Greenhouses 1 to 5 are similar in form, plan, and structure (Photos 22, 23). The greenhouses in the South Nursery Area have a larger interior volume with a taller gable roof than the greenhouses in the West Nursery Area.

The greenhouses have glazed walls with a base faced with horizontal wood siding. A single door opens out from the south façade of greenhouses 1 to 5. Greenhouses 1 to 4 have a steel truss roof system (attached to an exterior wood framing) creating an open free-span space. Greenhouses 6 to 8 are about half the length of the adjacent greenhouses to the west. These greenhouses also have a wood-truss roof structure rather steel trusses (Photos 24, 25). Greenhouses 9 to 11 are modern structures with a light tube steel internal structure (Photo 26).

### **The North Nursery Area**

The North Nursery Area includes eight greenhouses, a boiler room, a sawmill, and a building that includes a grading room, refrigeration units and packing shed. Greenhouses 1 to 7 in the North Nursery Area were developed from the mid-1940s into the 1950s for growing roses. The 1983 greenhouse at the eastern side of the North Nursery Area is covered with fiberglass. The sawmill (or wood shop) is also a modern building from about 1960. Since the nursery stopped growing roses 7 or 8 years ago, the buildings in this area have not been used. The condition of the greenhouses is now quite deteriorated, and the lath house has totally collapsed.

Greenhouses 3 to 7 are the largest at the nursery, approximately 40 feet wide and almost 300 feet in length (Photo 27). Greenhouses 1 and 2 are about half the length of the others. The greenhouses generally have a broad gable roof constructed of wood roof rafters connected to an internal steel tube structure (Photo 28). The lower section of the exterior walls is covered with horizontal wood siding. The roses were grown in flowerbeds rather than on benches seen in the orchid greenhouses. The glass is missing or damaged in greenhouses 1 to 7. A small addition to the east façade of greenhouse 7 has fertilizer mixing tanks and pesticide spray tanks.

At the north side of greenhouses 1 and 2 is the grading room and refrigeration units housed in a simple wood-frame structure covered with horizontal wood siding. To the west of the grading room is the taller boiler room for the North Nursery Area (Photo 29). The wood-frame boiler room has a gable roof and exterior walls covered with horizontal wood siding. An extension from the south façade of the boiler is largely glazed with small lights. The building has two large, multi-light windows also on the west façade. The packing shed extends to the south from the grading room/refrigeration units (Photo 30). This simple wood-frame building has a flat roof, horizontal wood siding, and six light windows.

### **Niven Nursery Property History**

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, James Niven purchased the 4.5 acres for his Larkspur nursery in 1921. The land was part of the original Brickerstaff ranch. Before starting the nursery, Niven worked as a horticulturist for the Henry Botha estate in Ross, then opened a small flower shop in Fairfax. Niven began raising orchids on the Botha estate.

Niven considered Larkspur to have the best climate in Marin County for growing greenhouse flowers. The area did not get the summer fog of Mill Valley or the heavy winter rain of the towns to the north (Niven 2000). The proximity of the property to a railroad line to transport his flowers to market in San Francisco was also an attraction. An early photograph of the Niven property on file in the Larkspur Heritage Preservation Board archives shows one greenhouse just west of the large Azevedo dairy barn. The August, 1924 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map of the property shows two greenhouses, George Niven's (James Niven's son) roofing company storage building, and one house. Niven started out growing orchids and gardenias.

James Niven died in 1933 at the age of 70. According to his *Independent Journal* obituary, Niven was considered to be "one of California's outstanding floriculturists" (Anonymous 1933). The article indicated that "scores of trophies were on display at his nursery and at his home" for the honors won at many flower shows. James Niven and his wife, Ada, also had two daughters in addition to their sons George and Walter, who died in a boiler accident at the nursery. George Niven and his wife, Inez, continued to operate the nursery after James Niven's death. George formed a separate company, Niven and Sarrat, to market his crops and grow gardenias. As the nursery's rose production increased in the 1940s, it replaced gardenias with roses. The first greenhouse for roses was built in 1939, then more were added over the years into the 1950s. In 1958, George Niven bought out the Niven and Sarrat partnership, joining together the rose and orchid departments.

After George Niven died in 1963, his widow, Inez, and their son, Jim, took over the business. In 1978, Jim, a Larkspur volunteer fireman, died in a fire engine accident. Jim's wife, Lorraine, became the company president. Cynthia Niven joined her mother in operating the nursery in 1982. Inez Niven died at the age of 79 in December 1982; she had been a corporate officer for the nursery for 32 years.

At peak production in the mid-1980s, the Niven Nursery had 250,000 square feet of greenhouses, 25 employees, and sales of over \$1 million annually. The company produced about 1.2 million roses annually. The Nivens were the last nursery owners to grow roses in Marin County until they stopped in about 1993 because of competition from low-priced, imported flowers. About 80,000 square feet of the original greenhouses are still in use. Nevertheless, the Nivens were responsible for about 50 percent of the total dollar value of nursery products sold in Marin County in 1997 (Harris 1998).

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#### PROJECT INFORMATION:

In March 2000, Ward Hill (M.A. Architectural History, University of Virginia) conducted a detailed survey of the Niven Nursery. His report evaluated the buildings at Niven Nursery, 2 Ward Street, Larkspur, CA as potentially historically and architecturally significant resources. The nursery includes greenhouses and a variety of support buildings related to the nursery operation. The evaluation was conducted under the four eligibility criteria of the California Register of Historical Resources, the criteria used for identifying historic resources for compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The survey included examining and photographing the exterior elevations and the interior spaces of the buildings. The interiors of two houses were not accessible. The written description of the buildings was prepared based on this visual inspection and discussions with past owners of this property.

Mr. Hill conducted archival research and oral history on the property during March 2000. The conclusion of his report was that the original nursery company buildings in the west nursery area dating from 1921 to the 1930s appear to be eligible for the California Register under Criteria A,B and C. The contributing buildings in the west nursery include greenhouses 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9 and the Niven residence. The 7 greenhouses and the house appeared to retain a good level of historic integrity. Mr. Hill conducted archival research on the history of Marin County, the City of Larkspur, the nursery business in the Bay Area and the Niven property. The research was conducted at the Bancroft Library and the Natural Resources Library Map Room at University of California, Berkeley, California; the Anne Kent California History Room, Marin County Main Library, San Rafael, California; Larkspur Heritage Preservation Board Archives; Helen Russell Library of Horticulture at the Strybing Arboretum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco.

In addition to archival research, the historical context statements and property history developed in this report was based on oral histories conducted by Ward Hill. In 2011 the Niven Nursery buildings were evaluated by Architectural Historian Kathleen Crawford and Senior Project Archaeologist Carrie D. Wills. They considered nine structures warranted HABS documentation. The nine buildings are different from the buildings considered significant by Mr. Hill in 2000 since many of the buildings evaluated by Mr. Hill have deteriorated so extensively that they no longer retain their historic integrity. The nine buildings identified in 2011 include the main residence and some of the early greenhouses that are the same structures Mr. Hill felt were significant. The additional buildings that were considered significant include the roofing materials storage building, the water tank, the boiler building, the carpenter shop, and additional greenhouses. Figure 1 differentiates the buildings that were evaluated to HABS standards in 2011 from the other buildings within the Niven Nursery. The remaining 12 buildings within the project site were so deteriorated that they had lost all historic integrity. Substantial deterioration of the buildings has taken place between the 2000 Hill survey and the 2011 MBA survey, due to the specific-site conditions.