

Sesnon House
(Cabrillo College Community Education Building)
On Cabrillo College Campus
6500 Soquel Drive
Aptos
Santa Cruz County
California ~~95003~~

HABS No. CA-2612

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44-APTOS,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

**Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Western Region
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94107**

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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SESNON HOUSE

(CABRILLO COLLEGE COMMUNITY EDUCATION BUILDING)

HABS No. CA-2612

- Location:** On Cabrillo College Campus
6500 Soquel Drive
Aptos, Santa Cruz County, CA 95003
- Present Owner:** Cabrillo College
6500 Soquel Drive
Aptos, CA 95003
- Present Use:** Administrative offices and meeting space until damaged in the October, 1989, Loma Prieta Earthquake. Currently not permitted for use until seismic upgrade completed.
- Significance:** The age and early mission-style design of Sesnon House is unique to Santa Cruz County, and the building pre-dates similar grand country homes in the area by 10 to 20 years. The interior construction and layout is also unaltered, apart from paint finishes applied to the original panelling, and the building therefore retains the ambiance of its original design. Although the property has been subsequently developed as a campus, the building is still surrounded by open space on 3 elevations and also retains its site context as an early 1900's country home.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. **Date of erection** - 1911
2. **Architect** - Ward & Blohme, Architects; San Francisco
3. **Original and subsequent owners** - 1911 - William Thomas & Mary Porter Sesnon (Sesnon Family)
1943 - Salesian Society of Watsonville
1973 - Cabrillo College

B. Historical Information

William Thomas Sesnon (1859-1929) was involved in business, politics and civic affairs, and was important on the local, state and even national levels.

An 1883 graduate in law from the University of California, Sesnon became County Clerk of San Francisco at the age of 22. During his lifetime, he also held the position of Clerk of the Superior Court in Los Angeles County, Assistant Secretary of State in Sacramento, Secretary of the State Railroad Commission, and Director of the Federal Reserve Bank in San Francisco. Sesnon co-founded the American Milling Company in San Francisco, and after this was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake, he founded the Sesnon Oil Company, which occupied him until his death.

Sesnon served both Presidents Taft and Harding as envoy to Europe and Japan, and he was a leading figure in the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915, serving as a director and chairman of the reception committee. He was named president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce in 1913, and remained active in that organization's senior council of past presidents. He was a director of the Bohemian Club, a member of the Pacific Union Club, and was prominent in numerous other organizations.

B. Historical Information - Continued:

William Sesnon and his wife, Mary Porter Sesnon, built their summer residence and vacation home in memory of her father, prominent Santa Cruz County businessman Benjamin Franklin Porter. After Porter died in 1905, the Sesnons began planning a home on the family property in his honor, but events of the 1906 earthquake delayed the project until 1909. Designed by the San Francisco architectural firm of Ward and Blohme, it was envisioned from its inception as impressive in both design and function, "among the choice country seats of the Pacific coast". Actual construction was not completed for two more years, and the final cost was estimated at over \$75,000.

In anticipation of large-scale entertaining, the ground floor was designed with a spacious entry, a ballroom/theater, broad doors opening directly to outdoor spaces, and a monumental staircase leading to seven bedrooms with private baths and a sleeping porch on the second floor. A pergola connected the main house to the relocated Porter family home, which was planned to house the kitchen, servants' quarters, and overflow housing for guests. Approximately six acres of landscaped grounds surrounded the home, including ponds, pathways, lawns, and exotic plants. Throughout construction and furnishing, only the highest quality materials were used, including oak flooring, copper pipes, metal work, tile and stained glass; the oriental dining hall featured teakwood furniture, imported grasscloth for the walls, Chinese rugs, and personally collected oriental antiques for furnishings.

Although based most of the year in San Francisco, the Sesnons remained active in Santa Cruz County. William Sesnon was on the board of the County Bank, and served as its president, and they were both instrumental in raising funds to construct the Porter Memorial Library in nearby Soquel, named as a memorial to Mary's father. They donated the land on which the library was built, as well as the services of the architectural firm of Ward and Blohme.

B. Historical Information Continued:

With the death of William Thomas Sesnon in 1929, and of Mary Porter Sesnon in 1930, the family spent less and less time at the home. A groundskeeper maintained the property, and farmland was leased out, but the house was more often empty than occupied. In 1943, when the family was approached by the Salesian Society of Watsonville, it was decided to sell the house and a large portion of the property. The house and immediate grounds were occupied first by the Salesian Brothers, who used the buildings as a seminary, and later by the Salesian Sisters who used it as a training center, retreat and summer camp. During this time the ornate decor in the house was replaced by more severe decorations befitting a religious order, and the original Porter House from 1872 was demolished, and a dormitory was built on its site.

The Salesian Order sold 100 acres north of Soquel Drive to Cabrillo College in 1961, for construction of the community college campus. In 1973, the Order sold its remaining 23 acres south of Soquel Avenue, on which the Sesnon House stands, to Cabrillo College, and additional buildings and access roads were constructed on the property for college use. After some interior renovation the College opened the Sesnon House in 1978 as the center for its Community Education program. As part of the renovation, porches that had earlier been enclosed were reopened, and the main interior stairway was restored. The layout and details of the large rooms were preserved, with upstairs rooms now serving as offices and the downstairs rooms serving as public and meeting spaces.

The building was damaged during the Loma Prieta Earthquake in 1989, after which it was red-tagged by the Office of the State Architect and has since been unoccupied pending receipt of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funding for repair and retrofit. The State will issue a Certificate of Occupancy after the repair and retrofit has been completed in accordance with the plans already approved by the Office of Regulatory Services, and reviewed by FEMA, the Office of Emergency Services and the State Historic Preservation Office.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

Sesnon House is an imposing two-story building in Spanish Colonial Revival Style, with an unreinforced-concrete foundation, cream-colored stuccoed sides, brown wooden trim elements, and a hipped roof of red clay barrel tiles. Originally built in 1911 as a country estate, it is now used as offices and meeting space by Cabrillo College. Although more recent development has occurred on much of the original acreage, Sesnon House itself remains somewhat isolated from other structures on all but one side, thus retaining its visual prominence and commanding presence.

The house is basically rectangular in form, with significant architectural facades on three sides, each with a different character. The north facade presents a prominent entry recessed between two large projecting bays. The entrance portico is supported with paired doric columns, and paved with clay tile and brick: a low wall of concrete and brick is topped with ornamental urns. The brick stairs leading to the entrance doors have been modified relatively recently, and a wrought iron railing has been added without detracting from the building's overall appearance. Leaded obscure glass is used in the arched windows of the first floor as well as the central casement windows of the second floor. Decorative balconies of wood and wrought metalwork utilize an "s" motif for Sesnon, also incorporated into the oak entry doors. This facade is set off with a modest landscaped area, bounded by a parking lot to the north.

The south facade is dominated by a semi-circular central veranda which opens out via a broad stairway to an expanse of open lawn and scattered mature trees. The porch on the west facade wraps around to run the length of the southern facade as well. On the left are three sets of double glass doors topped with stained glass fan lights, which open from the former ballroom directly to the porch. Plain wood casement windows run the length of the second floor, two hipped dormers project from the roof, and stuccoed chimneys are

placed on the south and west elevations. At the far end of the lawn is a row of tall Monterey Pines which visually separate the house and its grounds from more recent campus construction.

The west facade incorporates a side entry with a one-story porch surmounted by a pergola, and broad stairs leading down to the perimeter pathway. A wood-framed utility staircase, dating from the mid-1970's, projects somewhat into the outdoor porch space, but it is largely screened by the imposing porch and landscaping and is not a dominant intrusion. This facade fronts on a lawn, which drops sharply to a perimeter road.

The eastern facade has undergone alteration on the ground floor, and the originally open porch has been enclosed by grooved plywood siding and aluminum casement windows. Oriented at an angle to the southeast, and connected to the main building by a walkway, is a plain, rectangular, one-story stucco building, which was constructed as the kitchen and pantry for the main house. The walkway and a pergola structure also linked the main building to the original Porter family home, which was demolished in the 1940's.

1. **Architectural character** - Early example of California mission-style, two-story structure with smooth stucco exterior finish, main entry portico, and bell tile roof.
2. **Condition of fabric** - Reasonable, except for structural damage to plaster from earthquake, dry rot, and termite damage to approx. 10% of structural members.

B. Description of Exterior

1. **Overall dimensions** - 49'-6" x 116"-4"; Two story, approx. 28' ground to eaves.
2. **Foundations** - Unreinforced concrete.
3. **Walls** - Stucco over diagonal sheathing.

4. **Structural system, framing** - Wood frame, mainly 6"-x-2", and trusses.
5. **Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads** - Balcony structure on west elevation, per original design.
6. **Chimneys** - Two (2); unreinforced concrete.
7. **Openings:**
 - a. **Doorways, doors** - Substantial main entry and french casement.
 - b. **Windows, shutters** - Multi-pane and decorative lead glazing.
8. **Roof:**
 - a. **Shape, covering** - Bell tile and copper gutters.
 - b. **Cornice, eaves** - Detailed timber trim.
 - c. **Dormers, cupolas, towers** - Two (2) small dormers in roof area.

C. Description of Interior

1. **Floor Plans:**
 - a. **Basement** - None.
 - b. **First floor** - Two main rooms, with fireplaces, and reception.
 - c. **Second floor** - Six (6) bedrooms, four (4) bathrooms.
2. **Stairways** - One (1) main stairway and one (1) small staff stairway.
3. **Flooring** - Hardwood.
4. **Wall and ceiling finish** - Timber panelling, first floor; and plaster & lath, second floor.

5. **Openings:**
 - a. **Doorways & doors** - One (1) main entry, one (1) back entry, and seven (7) french doors.
 - b. **Windows** - Thirty-two (32), various sizes.
 6. **Decorative features & trim** - Extensive panelling to walls and ceilings on first floor; plate rail on second floor.
 7. **Hardware** - Mixed; possibly some original.
 8. **Mechanical equipment:**
 - a. **Heating, ventilation, air conditioning** - Ducted air heating, per original design.
 - b. **Lighting** - "Modern" chandeliers and wall fixtures on first floor; fluorescent on second floor.
 - c. **Plumbing** - Four (4) toilets and wash basins.
- D. Site** - Some original (now large) trees remaining, and lawn area at rear. Recent parking area in front of buildings replaces driveway entry.
1. **General setting & orientation** - New building on east side (approx. 30' separation), and other three (3) sides remain open as in original setting.
 2. **Historic landscape design** - Some original (now large) trees remaining, and lawn area at rear. Recent parking area in front of buildings replaces driveway entry.
 3. **Outbuildings** - Summer kitchen connected by covered walkway (pergola), and unchanged by original design.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original Architectural Drawings** - Blueprints of original architectural drawings, prepared circa 1909, showing elevations and cross-sections (no floor plans available) and held by the Maintenance Department at Cabrillo College (telephone: 408/479-6465). Attached photocopy of postcard showing original floor layout.
- B. Early Views** - Early views from news clippings held by the Santa Cruz Historical Museum, and period photographs of the interior and exterior held by the Business Office at Cabrillo College (telephone: 408/479-6406).
- C. Interviews** - Meeting with granddaughters of Mr. & Mrs. Sesnon, recollections of the house, circa 1943, prior to sale.
- D. Bibliography** - Capitola Green Sheet - Dec, 1977
Santa Cruz Sentinel - Nov, 1977
Pajaronian Register - Nov, 1977
Pajaronian Register - Nov, 1979
Architect & Engineer - Jun, 1917
Architect & Engineer - Jan, 1914
- E. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated** - None.
- F. Supplemental Material** - Family photos held by College.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Seismic retrofit, requiring partial removal of exterior stucco, removal of interior lath and plaster to second floor, and demolition of chimneys. Stucco will be replaced after new sheathing is installed and chimneys are reconstructed in wood frame and stucco, per original detail.

ADDENDUM TO:
SESNON HOUSE
(Cabrillo College Communication Education Building)
1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake Damage Survey
6500 Soquel Drive
Aptos
Santa Cruz County
California

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
PACIFIC GREAT BASIN SUPPORT OFFICE
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1111 Jackson Street
Oakland, CA 94607

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
SESNON HOUSE
(Cabrillo College Communication Education Building)

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In October and November of 1989, the National Park Service, Historic American Buildings Survey, completed a photographic survey of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake damage of the San Francisco Bay Area. The photographs and negatives from that project have been deposited in the field notes for this survey.

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