

MILLS HALL  
5000 MacArthur Boulevard  
Oakland  
Alameda County  
California

HALS CA-22  
CA-22

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

### MILLS HALL

HALS NO. CA - 22

Location: 5000 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland, Alameda County, CA  
Lat: 37.78255 Long: -122.18774

Significance: Mills College is the first women's college west of the Rocky Mountains, Mills Hall is the first building on the present site of Mills College in Oakland.

History: Founded in 1852 as the Young Ladies Protestant Seminary in Benicia, California, Mills College became the first women's college west of the Rocky Mountains. It was established by a group of New England trustees who wanted to bring culture and education to young women. When Benicia briefly became the capitol of California (1853-1854), the pioneer school's importance grew. In 1854, the trustees hired Mary Atkins, an Oberlin honors graduate, as the school's principal and rapid enrollment followed. (Oberlin College was the first college in the United States to open its doors to women.) Daughters of gold miners from the mining towns such as Rough and Ready, Drytown, and Murphys were housed with other daughters of San Francisco Nob Hill bankers and Sacramento merchants in the one-building, school. From 1855 to 1865, Ms. Atkins acquired and operated the school in 1865, she sold the property to Dr. Cyrus and Mrs. Susan Mills, Christian missionaries who returned from the Sandwich (now Hawaiian) Islands.

In 1870, the Mills purchased 55 acres of Oakland land (now part of East Oakland). The property was once part of a vast 44,800-acre Spanish land grant made in 1820 to Sergeant Luís María Peralta, the Spanish military man who helped establish the San Francisco Presidio among several important Spanish dwellings in California. The Mills initially named the school Alderwood Seminary due to the abundance of willows and alders near the creek and erased their name from all blueprints, except one, which was later shown to a newspaper register, and Mills Seminary became the accepted/designated name in 1871.

Beginning in 1871, the Mills were intimately involved during the planning process of the first building and its environs. They made initial plantings in the College's new campus in Oakland. Early photographs show a few oaks, buckeyes, alders, and willows dotting the open pastoral landscape. Dr. Mills travels to Asia, Europe, and the East Coast brought a wide variety of plants materials, including Japanese ornamentals, pines from Rome, a magnolia from Mount Vernon, and elms from New England. At the time of Dr. Mills' death in April 1884, 50,000 plantings were estimated. Susan Mills served as principal until her husband's death and later served as the College's President from 1890 to 1909. She died in 1912.

During the presidency of Dr. Aurelia Henry Reinhardt (1916-1943), the campus acquired an additional 136 acres and many of its roads and paths were landscaped. Dr. Reinhardt hired Professor Howard E. McMinn, a distinguished botanist who introduced many of the native and exotic trees and shrubs during his 39 years at the campus. Dr. McMinn published a number of botanical reference books, including *A Manual of Trees, Shrubs, and Vines of Mills College* (1919), which provided keys to identify and recognize woody plants on the campus.

From 1965-1966, four students surveyed and compiled data on woody plants as part of an independent study under the direction of Baki Kasapligil, Professor of Botany at Mills College. The students systematically surveyed the woody plants, created individual maps, prepared herbarium specimens, and compiled data into a large-scale campus plant identification map and an accompanying plant key list. Only the most prominent/most abundant species are shown to avoid overlapping and crowding of numbered/keyed species.

According to the 1967 campus plant identification map, the most prominent/abundant plant species surrounding Mills Hall environs were the following:

- *Leptospermum laevatum* /Australian tea tree
- *Magnolia stellata* /star magnolia
- *Prunus cerasifera* 'Atropurpurea'/purple leaf plums
- *Rosa banksiae*/banksia Rose
- *Ulmus glaba* Huds. 'camperdownii/camperdown elms

Also on the 1967 map, an oval lawn sits across from Mills Hall with camperdown elms and mourning cypresses planted on the lawn's eastern portion. In the 1870's, young women were expected to walk a mile daily and often would make eight turns around the Oval in front of the Hall. (Today, six and one-half laps around the Oval equals one mile.)

In 1877, Mills College became incorporated and was deeded to a Board of Trustees. In 1885, the College Charter and its first baccalaureate degrees were granted. In 1918, Mills became a fully accredited college and in 1920, opened a graduate school.

The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake forced Mills Hall to close its doors due to foundation damage; it was reopened in 1994 after an extensive rehabilitation. The building is on the State and National Registers: California Registered Landmark #849 and National Register of Historic Places No. H0047236 and is a HABS-registered building (HABS CA-2401).

At the time of this writing, Mills College continues its legacy as a small, private liberal arts college and offers undergraduate programs to women and graduate programs to women and men. Among its notable alumnae includes:

- March Fong Eu, '47, Former U.S. Ambassador to Micronesia and California Secretary of State. She was the first Californian of Chinese descent to be elected to a state constitutional office
- Barbara Lee, '73, U.S. House of Representative since 1998, serves Oakland's Congressional District in Washington, D.C. after having served as California State Senator and Assembly Representative

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- Norman, Pierce Company, Mills College for young women: covering one hundred and fifty acres, ideally located in the beautiful Oakland hills, The Company, San Francisco, 189?.
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- Interview Dave Johnson, the Mills College landscape architect in 1996...

Historian: Jennifer Liw and Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2005  
[pattillo@PGAdesign.com](mailto:pattillo@PGAdesign.com)  
PGAdesign  
444 17th Street  
Oakland, CA 94612  
(510) 550-8855