

ALTA PLAZA
Bounded by Jackson, Steiner, Clay & Scott Streets
San Francisco
San Francisco County
California

HALS CA-16
CA-16

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

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ALTA PLAZA

HALS NO. CA-16

- Location:** Bounded by Jackson, Steiner, Clay, and Scott Streets, San Francisco, San Francisco County, California
Latitude: 37.79107 Longitude: -122.43767
- Significance:** Alta Plaza was laid out and reserved as a public square by City Ordinance, State Act, Act of Congress, and U.S. Supreme Court decision. The park was partially developed under the supervision of noted West Coast landscape designer John McLaren. Initial development may have been based on a design by noted landscape designer Rudolph Ulrich.
- Description:** Alta Plaza is an approximately 12 acre (four city blocks) public park on the crest of a hill in the Pacific Heights neighborhood of San Francisco. The southeastern half of the park is extremely steep and has a formal, terraced design. The northwestern half slopes more gently in comparison, and has a more pastoral design. The park is known for its views and its grand stairway.
- History:** Alta Plaza was laid out and reserved as a public square from former Mexican pueblo lands by City Ordinance No. 822 of June 20, 1855 (also known as the Van Ness Ordinance), State Act of March 11, 1858, and the Act of Congress of July 1, 1864, 13 Stat. 332, c. 194. A lawsuit disputing the City's title to Alta Plaza was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. It was not until 1888 that the City had clear title to Alta Plaza.

In 1890, neighboring property owners paid for a survey and awarded a prize to R. Ulrich for his design plans. It is probable that R. Ulrich was noted landscape designer Rudolph Ulrich (1841-1906). Between 1891 and 1899, the Department of Streets, Highways, and Squares graded, spread loam, installed macadam walks, concrete archways, bulkheads, landings, sidewalks, gutters, and sewers, and planted Monterey Cypress trees and Kentucky grass.

In 1899, administration of public squares was transferred to the Parks Department, under Superintendent of Parks John Hays McLaren (1846-1943). By July of 1905, the Parks Department had constructed four flights of terrace steps, and planted trees and shrubs. In September of 1905, the Board approved a plan submitted by Park Commissioner and sculptor Earl Cummings for a Beaux Arts view overlook at the crest of the hill. The base and terrace had already been constructed. Construction was to begin when funding became available in July of 1906.

On the morning of April 18, 1906, a major earthquake struck San Francisco.

Residents watched the city burn from Alta Plaza. By evening, homeless families filled the park.

The first new construction done by the City in Alta Plaza after the earthquake was a public lavatory in 1909, followed by tennis courts in 1910 and 1911. Although the plan for the view overlook was re-submitted and approved in 1909, it was never built. Two additional tennis courts and a basketball court were installed in 1933. The basketball court and one tennis court were replaced with a playground in the 1950s. Since then, the playground has been remodeled twice, other structures have aged, vegetation has matured or died, and a path has been added for ADA compliance.

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