

KOHL MANSION  
(The Oaks)  
(Sisters of Mercy High School)  
2750 Adeline Drive  
Burlingame  
San Mateo County  
California

HALS CA-70  
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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

### KOHL MANSION (The Oaks, Sisters of Mercy High School)

HALS NO. CA-70

Location: 2750 Adeline Drive, Burlingame, San Mateo County, California.  
Lat: 37.582283, Long: -122.382908 (Pool on the terrace south of the mansion, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: The Kohl Mansion property, now the site of Sisters of Mercy High School, is significant for its association with C. Frederick Kohl a San Francisco capitalist and socialite. Kohl inherited the Alaska Commercial Company (ACC) which acquired the Russian American Company (RAC) in 1867 when Alaska became a United States Territory. ACC was originally Hutchison, Kohl & Company of San Francisco, founded by Frederick Kohl's father William Kohl. ACC "had a near-monopoly on Alaska commercial and trading ventures, with a specific interest in the fur trade (primarily sea otters) developed by the RAC" according to the Northwest Trading Company.

Kohl was one of the richest men in the San Francisco "Gold Belt". In addition to the Burlingame estate Kohl owned property in downtown San Mateo that is now Central Park, the Kohl office building in downtown San Francisco and a "castle" at Lake Tahoe, California.

Description: The primary entrance to the Kohl property is at the east corner off Adeline Drive and Hoover Avenue. There is a secondary entry / exit at the south corner at Adeline and Alvarado Avenue. From the east entrance one drives along an ascending, curving, asphalt driveway and beneath a canopy of mature oaks. There is a rustic, mortared stone wall along the west side of the drive, and a cobble-lined swale on the east edge. Originally the driveway was gravel. The drive takes you to the high point of the site where the mansion is revealed. The mansion, terrace and gardens site roughly in the middle of the property. The main Mercy High School building is directly north of the mansion and all other buildings on the campus lie further north and lower in elevation.

The west facing entrance to the mansion has been altered to provide parking for the high school. Originally there had been a large carriage house and likely a turn-around opposite the front door. Today a lozenge-shaped planting island, with a row of five crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*), is at this location.

An article in the *Port Arthur News* referred to the Kohl Mansion as "the greatest palace ever built in the West." The Kohl Mansion was damaged during the October 17, 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and because the mansion is listed on the National Register it was eligible for FEMA funding. In 1982 a complete

restoration of the mansion's exterior was undertaken. It is likely that some of the changes to the original landscape were installed at that time. One of the most significant changes is the addition of a prominent accessible path that connects the parking lot to the grand terrace on the south side of the mansion. Much of these restoration efforts were implemented sensitively and the original historic fabric has been retained.

A grand terrace extends the full width of the mansion and measures 215' by 50 – 85'.<sup>1</sup> A wall at the perimeter is made of concrete with a concrete cap. It was built to emulate a massive stone wall. It is seating height and two feet wide with a thick, oversized cap. Weathering and the presence of lichen enhance the finish and increase the illusion that it is a stone wall. A section of the wall was removed where the new accessible ramp meets the terrace but otherwise the original wall has been retained. Similar walls surround two 16' diameter round planters at either end of the terrace. At the western planter one half of the original wall was retained and one half replaced with new concrete similar in scale and color. The eastern planter was replaced entirely.

South of the terrace a lawn extends beyond the width of the terrace and is 295' wide and 87' deep. The east edge of the lawn has a planting bed that includes three historic lemon trees and a border of new, white shrub roses. Mature evergreen live oaks (*Quercus agrifolia*) and coniferous trees (Deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*) and blue atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca')) fill the space beyond the south edge of the lawn.

Live oaks cover much of the property which inspired the Kohls to name the estate "The Oaks". Most of the oaks on the property appear to be in good health; some are in decline, some have died, and some have been replaced. Within the great lawn there are two young oaks that appear to be replacements for trees that have died.

In addition to the two round planters on the terrace there is one 17' square pool with a single water jet. The edge is defined by a weathered, raised concrete curb. There are a few water lilies in the pool. Foundation plantings all appear to be new with the exception of a few hybrid roses with gnarled trunks. A 1916 photograph of the mansion shows only low boxwood hedges at foundations. There are also two sculpted boxwood hedges in the shape of a script "E" and two boxwood plants trimmed into three-sided pyramids. These elements are at either side of the front door. There is also an historic camellia (*Camellia japonica*) on the north side of the house.

Much of the original sunken rose garden is present. It is set 5' lower than the

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<sup>1</sup> All dimensions taken from Google Earth so are approximate.

terrace and consists of brick paths set in a basket weave pattern, and small rose beds bordered with sheared boxwood hedges. Overall the rose garden measures 48' by 54' and is made up of 25 rose beds in a symmetrical pattern of round and rectangular beds. Two sets of brick steps with wing walls lead down into the rose garden from the south. The surface between the rose garden and the terrace is pea gravel.

Three tennis courts and a swimming pool, now part of the Mercy High School Fitness Center, are east of the sunken rose garden and replace a historic tennis court.

All of the flatwork on the terrace has been replaced with scored concrete. The color is similar to the original concrete but warmer in tone. There are three sets of steps leading up onto the terrace. One set is a broad set of steps measuring 40' across that leads onto the lawn.

Overall the integrity of the garden is good. Mercy High School is about the same size as the original Kohl property. Changes to the grounds necessitated by the change in use are obvious but generally have been handled appropriately. Adjacent to the mansion good efforts have been made to comply with the Secretary's standards. Where original historic fabric was too deteriorated to be retained replacements have been executed in a sensitive manner and in such a way that the viewer can easily understand what is original.

History:

The Kohl Mansion was built for Charles Frederick "Freddie" Kohl and his wife Mary Elizabeth "Bessie" Godley. The 53-room Tudor-style brick structure was designed by architects George Howard and John White of Hillsborough and was planned to closely resemble *Somerset House*, the residence of the Duke of Surrey in England.

Frederick Kohl was born in 1863, the son of William H. Kohl who was a pioneer ship builder and co-founder of the Alaska Commercial Company. Frederic attended Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. Though he did not graduate with his class he was named a "success of the class of 1868". Upon returning to the family home Kohl became a popular figure in peninsula and San Francisco high society. In 1896 he married Elizabeth Dunlop, who died in 1900. William Kohl died and left the Kohl Estate – a property in San Mateo to his son. Frederick assumed responsibility for managing the family businesses at that time.

He married Ms. Godley in 1904 and acquired the 40-acre Burlingame property in order to build a home where they could entertain and where Bessie, who had a beautiful contralto voice, could perform for their guests. In 1916 Bessie left Frederick for Europe and never returned. For a time Frederick lived at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. He began a relationship with Marion

Louderback Lord and left her the bulk of his \$5 million estate when died November 23, 1921. Ms. Lord sold the property to The Sisters of Mercy who initially used the mansion as a convent then converted it to Mercy High School for girls in 1931.

In 1921 the Kohl Mansion was leased to United Artists and the movie “Little Lord Fauntleroy” was filmed in the house. In 1996, “Flubber” starring Robin Williams was filmed there.

#### Sisters of Mercy History

The Sisters of Mercy was founded in 1831 by Catherine McAuley, a wealthy Irish heiress, who wanted to care for poor women and children in Ireland. The sisters arrived in San Francisco prior to 1855 and established St. Mary’s Hospital, retirement facilities and four schools in San Francisco and Oakland. They purchased the Kohl Mansion in 1924 and used it as the Motherhouse for the region. By 1952 they ran a high school in San Francisco and 25 elementary schools throughout California. In 1989 they became co-sponsors of Mercy Housing, Inc. Their mission is to provide quality, affordable, housing for the poor, to strengthen families, and to promote healthy communities.

The Kohl Mansion was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 (#82002258).

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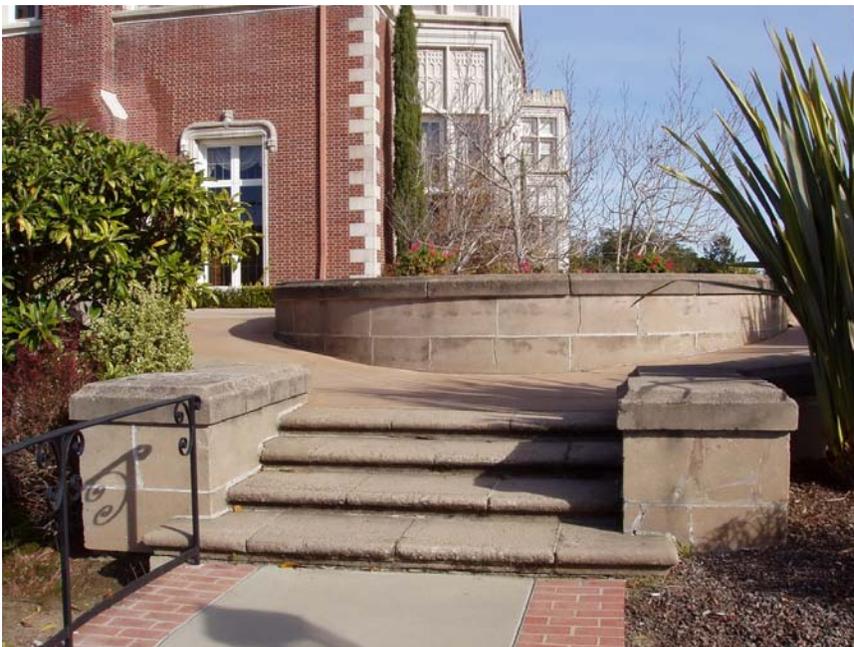
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Great terrace on the south side of the mansion showing the terrace  
wall, steps, and foundation plantings (Chris Pattillo, January 8,  
2012).



Detail of steps and wall at the perimeter of the terrace on the south side of the mansion (Chris Pattillo, January 8, 2012).



Steps and 16" diameter round planter at the west side of the terrace. This set of steps and circular planter are visible in a 1916 photo found in *History of San Mateo County* (Chris Pattillo, January 8, 2012).



Steps, 16' diameter round planter and boxwood lined rose beds at the east side of the terrace (Chris Pattillo, January 8, 2012). Pea gravel paths connect to sunken rose garden.



Sunken rose garden east of the mansion (Chris Pattillo, January 8, 2012).



Detail of the sunken rose garden showing paving and beds (Chris Pattillo, January 8, 2012).



One of two matching topiary boxwood at either side of the front door (Chris Pattillo, January 8, 2012).