

SAKAI NURSERY, WORKER HOUSING  
99 South 47<sup>th</sup> Street  
Richmond  
Contra Costa County  
California

HALS No. CA-6-I

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Pacific West Regional Office  
1111 Jackson Street  
Oakland, CA 94607

**HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY**  
**Sakai Nursery, Worker Housing**

**HALS No. CA-6-I**

**Location:** 99 South 47<sup>th</sup> Street  
City of Richmond, Contra Costa County  
California

U.S.G.S. Richmond Quadrangle (7.5')  
Mercator Coordinates: 559224mE, 4198192mN  
559371mE, 4198186mN  
559236mE, 4198024mN  
559398mE, 4198021mN

**Significance:** The Sakai Nursery Worker Housing is a complex of five buildings that contribute to the historic significance of the Sakai Nursery. The Sakai Nursery is located at the intersections of South 47<sup>th</sup> Street and Florida Avenue in Richmond, Contra Costa County, California. The nursery is located on a nearly rectangular 5.59-acre site that is bounded on the north by a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) right-of-way, on the east by South 47<sup>th</sup> Street, on the south by Florida Avenue, and on the west by South 45<sup>th</sup> Street. The Oishi Nursery (HALS No. CA-5) is located east of the Sakai Nursery on the east side of South 47<sup>th</sup> Street. In addition to the worker housing complex (a small house, duplex, restrooms, storage and vehicle shed), the Sakai Nursery site includes the original Sakai family house, another family residence, twenty greenhouses, and various buildings and structures such as a boiler house, water tanks, a flower warehouse for grading and packaging cut roses, storage sheds, paved paths, a system of drainage trenches, and overhead steam lines for heating the greenhouses that were associated with the operation of the nursery. Two residences that were originally built for Sakai family members are located across Florida Avenue on separate parcels of land to the south of the nursery proper.

The Sakai Nursery began in 1906 when the Tokaro Sakai family purchased two and a half acres of land, relocated a greenhouse from another nursery in Berkeley to the property, and began to grow carnations for cut-flower production. By 1927, the family had switched to raising greenhouse roses. The Sakai Nursery continued to specialize in growing high-quality roses that sold at premium prices and to be family-owned and family-operated until its closure in 2003. The property was sold to the Richmond Community Redevelopment Agency in 2006.

The Sakai Nursery was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places by the California State Historic Preservation Officer in 2007 under Criterion A at a local level of significance for its significant associations with Japanese American history in Richmond and with the history of the San Francisco Bay Area cut-flower nursery business. When it closed in 2003, the Sakai Nursery was one of the last two remaining examples of the community of Japanese American flower growers which developed in Richmond during the first decade of the twentieth century. The other example was the Oishi Nursery (HALS CA-5) located on an adjacent property on the east side of South 47<sup>th</sup> Street.

Although not large enough to support the range of local services and organizations that developed in *Nihonmachi*s (Japantowns) in cities such as San Francisco and San Jose, Richmond's cluster of Japanese American nurseries were historically significant as a *Nikkei* (Japanese immigrant and their American-born descendants) community centered around the cut-flower industry. By 1910, two clusters of Japanese-owned flower nurseries formed the heart of this close-knit community, and by World War II, approximately twenty nurseries had been established. These nurseries grew primarily carnations and roses, two flower types that were sold every day of the year and thus provided a steady source of income. The cut-flower industry provided an economic means for this ethnic community to survive the initial wave of immigration and to continue to flourish into the late twentieth century. Because a large number of the Japanese nursery owners had purchased their land before the passage of the 1913 Alien Land Law, which forbade property ownership to most Japanese as Aliens ineligible for citizenship, Richmond's Japanese American community was a remarkably stable and long-lived ethnic enclave. Most of California's Japanese American communities could not be recreated after World War II, and their members dispersed. However, despite their forced removal from homes and businesses during World War II, many of Richmond's Japanese American nursery owners returned to their neighborhood and revived their businesses after the war.

Richmond's Japanese-owned nurseries were part of the larger group of San Francisco Bay Area cut-flower nurseries that developed on the fringes of the urban core in San Francisco, Contra Costa, Alameda, and Santa Clara counties during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. With a limited capital investment, families were able through intensive cultivation and

hard work to utilize small tracts of open land – often as little as one acre – to create profitable floricultural enterprises. After World War II, increasing development pressures in these areas, along with changing technology and market forces, contributed to the displacement of the Bay Area nurseries. Additionally, in Richmond the extension of the Eastshore Freeway (Interstate 80), located just east of the Sakai Nursery, resulted in many of Richmond's Japanese American nursery owners losing their land to during the early 1950s. The freeway and new commercial and residential development have replaced these nursery operations.

**Description:**

The Worker Housing complex is a group of five buildings facing north and south adjacent to the east/west driveway joining the Sakai Family House to the house on South 45<sup>th</sup> Street. Four building are arranged in a row on the south side of the driveway and one building is on the north.

The Worker Housing includes a small single dwelling and a duplex. Ancillary structures include restroom facility, a small storage building and a vehicle shed. The duplex at the western end of the complex is a simply detailed, wood-frame structure with a concrete slab foundation, rectangular plan (42'-0" x 17'-0"), and shallow-pitch gable roof with overhanging eaves and exposed rafters. Four sheet metal flues project above the roof. Walls are clad in nine inch wide horizontal wood siding. The wood-sash windows are double-hung, with plain surrounds. Two paneled doors with a window and two windows are set into the symmetrical north-facing front of the building; a single window is set into each end; and three windows are at the rear (south) facade. The interior of each unit has gypsum board walls, simple wood baseboard, vinyl floors, and a small kitchen area (with a sink, stove and built-in shelves) near the entrance door. Between the two units is a common bathroom at the center of the south wall. The building appears intact except for the addition of a lean-to carport at the east end.

At eastern end of the complex, the single family dwelling unit is a small wood-frame structure, with brick footings, has a rectangular plan (15'-0" x 17'-0") and gable roof with exposed rafters. Walls are clad in horizontal five inch wide wood siding; the roof is clad in corrugated metal. A door and double-hung window with plain surrounds are set into the north and east facades of the building; a single double-hung window is set into the west facade; and two fixed-pane windows are at the rear. Inside, the house has a single room with an addition on the south. The interior has a vinyl floor, gypsum board walls with a narrow wood baseboard and built-in

shelves on the south wall. A single door leads from the main space into the shed-roofed extension at the rear (south) enclosing the kitchen, an early addition, with built-in cabinets and a sink.

Adjacent to the main house, the small wood-frame structure (12'-0" x 15'-0") housing restrooms has a concrete slab foundation, rectangular plan, and gable roof with exposed rafters. The north-facing front is clad in horizontal wood siding; the sidewalls, rear wall, and roof are clad in corrugated metal. Two hollow-core doors with plain surrounds are set into the front. With the exception of two small aluminum windows at the rear, the building appears to be intact. The women's room is on the east and men's room on the west. Inside each restroom has a toilet, a sink and a shower (a hot water heater is adjacent to the men's room shower). The women's room has pressboard walls while the men's room has tongue and groove siding on the walls.

The storage shed west of the restroom is a small wood-frame structure, with brick footings, has a rectangular plan and shed roof with exposed rafters. Walls are clad in horizontal wood siding with corner boards. A single door of horizontal wood siding is set into the front (north) of the building, flanked by a small fixed-pane window. A casement window is set into the west end. The building is in need of paint, but has not been altered.

The vehicle shed (which includes a fertilizer storage area) is a crudely built wood-frame structure has a rectangular plan (21'-0" x 60'-0") and shallow-pitch gable roof. The 3 1/2" x 3 1/2" posts are arranged in rows east to west ten feet on center. Walls and roof are clad in corrugated metal. The vehicle shed has five openings facing south. There are three open garage stalls at the west end; sliding doors at the east end enclose two stalls for fertilizer storage.

**Historical Context:** The Sakai Nursery Worker Housing

*Historical Background: The Sakai Nursery*

Like all Japanese immigrants in the late nineteenth century, Kotaro Sakai came to the United States in 1898 in search of economic opportunities. Born in 1873 as Kozaburo Oishi, he was adopted by the Sakai family at age two after the Sakai's oldest son had died. In the *yoshi* tradition that shaped many Japanese families, those without sons adopted younger boys from nearby families to ensure a male inheritor of the family's name and property. Descendants describe the Oishis as samurais who later turned to education, while the Sakais were farmers cultivating small plots of land.

Kotaro's birth father, Sadamoto Oishi, was a secondary school teacher and teacher of Confucian ethics.<sup>1</sup> Kotaro moved back to the Oishi family home to attend high school. *Yoshi* sons often married a daughter of the family in which they were adopted, and Kotaro married Chu Sakai in 1897 in their hometown of Sasayama in the prefecture or state of Hyogo-ken.<sup>2</sup>

Kotaro left his wife and infant daughter, Chizuru, in 1898 and immigrated to the San Jose area, where his two older brothers, Tokutaro and Seizo Oishi, were already in business. According to family accounts, he farmed and cleared land to support himself before his wife left their daughter with her mother and joined him later that same year. Starting a new life in the United States meant great effort for the couple. Chu worked for several years as domestic help for a German family, while Kotaro continued as an agricultural worker, sometimes for his brothers' operation. By approximately 1902, they had gained the resources to lease land in the Alviso area and grew strawberries while Chu gave birth to a second daughter Shizue (Sue) in 1903 and son Tetsuma in 1906. Chu would leave the baby in a basket alongside the fields while she worked with her husband.<sup>3</sup>

In 1906, the Sakais purchased two and a half acres of bare land in Richmond and soon relocated a broken-down greenhouse from a nursery in Berkeley to the property. Sam Sakai, son of Kotaro and Chizuru, described their setting down roots in Richmond:

*The location was cheap property and about a half mile to the street car line. In those days back in 1906, the distance to transportation became a big factor. In Richmond, Adachi family and Nabeta Brothers were operating the nursery. My parents were given much help in building their home and in digging a well by hand. Much help was given over how to grow the flowers as well as how to build the greenhouses.*<sup>4</sup>

The nursery started out with carnation stock, and the Sakais soon hired a knowledgeable *Issei* from the Adachis who added needed expertise to the nursery. The first fifteen years in Richmond were marked by hard work and slow growth, with some periods of profit

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<sup>1</sup> Names, birth dates, and some details are from an unpublished genealogy supplied by Charlotte Sakai titled "Sadamoto Oishi Family."

<sup>2</sup> "The Way We Were . . ." 1996, 44-45, 49.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

when new greenhouses and a boiler were added to the operation. Eldest son Tetsuma described some of the family's struggle during this period:

*After the Issei quit (in 1918) we had a series of men working for us, but none knew how to grow carnations. The business started to go downhill. Many of our neighbors who had been farming in Japan . . . were doing very well growing carnations. [Kotaro] never had any farming experience (or a green thumb!).<sup>5</sup>*

While Kotaro concentrated on selling their flowersXcarrying up to fifty bunches of carnations on his back as he set out to the San Francisco Flower Market at 4:30 a.m. three times per weekXhe left the nursery management to Chu and hired workers. Sakai family members have described Chu as the “brains and energy” behind the nursery; her drive, ambition, and family background in farming apparently made her a critical foundation to the success of the Sakai nursery.<sup>6</sup> Although often overlooked, the contributions of immigrant women were often a critical factor in the establishment of family businesses. A 1929 publication titled “The History of Japanese Floriculture in California” included an essay describing the myriad roles that wives and mothers played in the establishment of nurseries. Along with their own domestic chores and childcare, *Issei* women’s work included many greenhouse tasks as well as supervising the feeding and care of hired employees.

The Sakai family grew as Sam, Roy, and Ruby was born in 1909, 1912, and 1922. Kotaro and Chu also took in Jun Agari, the young son of their first daughter who had remained in Japan when they emigrated and who died at an early age.<sup>7</sup> In 1922, a two-story home replaced the collection of structures that had previously provided the family living quarters. Sam Sakai described the family as living in “a little bunkhouse” with “a kitchen in one corner, bedroom and shelving.” A shed holding a Japanese bath was nearby, yet spaced to keep the fire that heated water from spreading to other buildings.<sup>8</sup> The City of Richmond building department file for 99 S. 47th St. includes a permit to K. Sakai dated "5/10/22" for a “cottage” valued at \$3,500 with the builder listed as J.F. Walden. (This simple Craftsman Style house and the

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<sup>5</sup> “The Way We Were . . .” 1996, 52.

<sup>6</sup> “The Way We Were . . .” 1996, 51; Kawaguchi 1995, 46-47; Sam Sakai 2004; William Sakai 2004.

<sup>7</sup> “The Way We Were . . .” 1996, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Sam Sakai 2004, 21.

water tower near it may be the oldest structures extant on the current property.)

Sometime in 1924, the Sakais bought an adjoining two and a half acres and began to grow roses. Tetsuma described the shift as difficult for the business, with his parents still dependant on hired workers for floricultural expertise, which was not always on hand. The quality of the roses suffered in the first few years, and business was so slow that Chu convinced Tetsuma to drop out of college in 1925 to help with the family enterprise.<sup>9</sup> Tetsuma took on the huge task of renovating the original greenhouses, which were now nearly two decades old. He described them later as “too low, and of poor quality. They had to be modernizedXthey had no salvage value so we tore them down and put up new greenhouses.” Tetsuma assisted a hired carpenter in building the first new greenhouse, and then built the rest himself with help from family and hired hands.<sup>10</sup> “We were able to put up close to 100,000 square feet,” Tetsuma later recalled. Permits in the City of Richmond building department show six greenhouses were approved for Mikado Nursery, as the property was briefly listed, and later Sakai Brothers, between 1927 and 1931.<sup>11</sup>

According to historian Gary Kawaguchi, nurseries specializing in roses and carnations weathered the Great Depression better because their flowers could be cut and sold on a daily basis unlike chrysanthemums, which only sold a few months of the year and were more dependent on out-of-state business.<sup>12</sup> The Sakais continued to prosper enough to add to their nursery throughout the 1930s. They bought an additional two acres of land in 1932, and added seven more greenhouses to the property by spring of 1940.<sup>13</sup> As their sons reached adulthood and married, they built modest homes for their new families on or near the nursery. A one-story stucco house was built on the western edge of the property for Tetsuma in 1938. Sam and his bride Nellie built a similar home in 1940 just across from the Oishi property at 223 S. 47th St. in which Sam still resides.<sup>14</sup> A home for the youngest son, Roy, was built in 1941 just across from the southwest corner of the nursery

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Permits in the city's building department for new or rebuilt greenhouses at 99 S. 47<sup>th</sup> St. are dated 8/12/27, 8/3/28 (for two greenhouses), 9/11/30, and 8/13/31 (for two greenhouses); these permits were for Greenhouse Nos. 8 through 13 which are located in a row on the northern portion of the nursery property.

<sup>12</sup> Kawaguchi 1993, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Permits found in the city's building department for additional greenhouses are dated 6/30/36, 9/24/36, 6/28/37, 10/2/37, 9/1/39 (for two one-story “garden houses”), and 4/12/40; these permits were for Greenhouses Nos. 1 through 7 which are located in a row on the northern portion of the nursery property.

<sup>14</sup> Mr. Sakai died on 30 January 2008, after this historic context was prepared.

at the corner of Florida and South 45<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>15</sup> All of these homes are still standing, but the house at 200 S. 45<sup>th</sup> St. (Roy's home) is no longer owned by the Sakai family. Their construction within and adjacent to the nursery property attested to the importance of the intergenerational management for the nursery, and the commitment family members had to building upon the foundations laid by *Issei* pioneers.

This foundation was threatened by the build-up to wartime relocation. A lease arrangement for the nursery was made with Mr. Brunetti from the Oakland Flower Shop, and the Sakais, unlike most of their Richmond neighbors, made the choice to move to Central California before “enemy aliens” were forcibly removed. “We went to Stockton first thinking it wasn’t coastal and would be okay,” recalled Tetsuma’s wife Kazue. They were encouraged to relocate to Stockton by the husband of the family’s eldest daughter, Sue, who owned a store and large home in that town.<sup>16</sup> Japanese and Japanese Americans in the Central Valley were sent to Rowher Relocation Camp, rather than Topaz where the rest of Richmond’s families were assigned, so the Sakais made the three-day train trip to Arkansas after temporary incarceration at the Stockton fairgrounds.

The Sakais spent a relatively short time behind barbed wire. By spring of 1943, Sam Sakai had found employment in a Denver nursery through a Bay Area nursery colleague who had relocated to Colorado as internment approached. Sam and his wife Nellie both worked at the nursery and lived in an apartment supplied by the business. When his older brother Tetsuma and his wife decided to join them, Sam and Nellie found and purchased a house in Denver with savings from the Richmond nursery. A year or so later, Nellie’s parents joined them when the Sam and Nellie rented about sixty acres near Greeley, Colorado, where they grew vegetables.<sup>17</sup> The youngest son, Roy, left Rowher to serve in the U.S. armed forces.

Tetsuma Sakai was able to return to Richmond shortly after the New Year in 1945 and stayed for a month with their friends and neighbors John and Clara Heinemann. In an apparent attempt to pressure the family to extend the lease or even sell their business, the representative from the Oakland Flower Shop told Sakai that the family would not be able to find workers and their business would fail. Tetsuma and his parents reclaimed the family property

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<sup>15</sup> Permits in the city's building department for these three buildings are dated 1/25/38, 3/5/40, and 7/18/41.

<sup>16</sup> Sam Sakai 2004; “The Way We Were . . .” 1996, 53-54; William Sakai 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Sam Sakai 2004.

but only received a portion of the profits entitled to them. Sam Sakai reported that the nursery workers did quit their jobs, but Clara Heinemann came back to her pre-war job in the packing shed, and the family brought in a new crew by recruiting workers from the relocation camp.<sup>18</sup>

The Sakai facilities and plant stock were in a healthy enough condition so that the family began making profits shortly after the war ended. By the late 1940s, enough money had been saved for Tetsuma to purchase land for a Sakai nursery in Hayward that was at one time, according to his son William, the largest rose nursery in the U.S. As the Richmond nursery revived and flourished, they added new structures including a substantially larger boiler house in 1947. The boiler house was subsequently expanded twice- in 1950 and 1957 - reflecting the expansion of the nursery's business. In 1950, an incinerator and separate quarters for nursery workers were constructed. Reflecting an increased activity of production, the Sakais added extensions to their sorting and storage shed in 1952 and 1957.<sup>19</sup> They also built another house at 4606 Florida Ave. in 1958 for Chu Sakai.<sup>20</sup>

As the *Nisei* took over nursery operations, Tetsuma remained in charge of production for the Richmond nursery, while Sam Sakai concentrated on marketing their flowers and continuing to serve as president of the California Flower Market board. The re-transfer of the California Flower Market operations and facility to returning *Nikkei* and the reconstitution of the Flower Market Board were largely due to Sam's efforts. Sam was a founder of the floral Trade Council, which worked to aid domestic flower growers as foreign competition increased, and was a primary force behind the large new facility the California Flower Market opened in 1956. When he retired from the Board in 1968 he was still appearing early in the Market to sell Sakai flowers. California Flower Market historian Gary Kawaguchi described Sam Sakai as a "man of few words and deliberate action [who] made his mark on the Market and the industry, serving on many industry-related boards in addition to his duties as president and his responsibilities to a thriving nursery."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "The Way We Were . . ." 1996, 46; Sam Sakai 2004.

<sup>19</sup> The City of Richmond building department files hold permits for a new boiler house dated 1/3/47; a brick incinerator was permitted on 7/6/50; worker's housing from 8/24/50; an addition of 20'-0 x 28'-0 to the sorting shed was permitted on 8/28/52 and another addition of 28'3 x 30'-0 appears on a permit dated 10/31/57.

<sup>20</sup> Sakai, William, Letter to City of Richmond Public Works (5 October 2006) in the City of Richmond Building Department files; Oshige, John (retired Sakai Nursery manager) and Mary, Interview by Denise Bradley, 1 March 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Kawaguchi 1993, 67-76.

The Sakai Brothers nursery continued to prosper long after other family nurseries floundered by concentrating on growing high-quality roses that sold at premium prices. Because cut roses were extremely perishable and Northern California growers could control temperatures and time their harvests for holiday sales more accurately than South American growers, initially foreign imports took somewhat less of a toll on the Sakais' business than it did on growers of other types of flowers. Yet, despite the efforts of Tetsuma, Sam, and Roy to plan for succession, only a few of the *Sansei* generation were interested in the family rose business.<sup>22</sup>

The nursery quit cultivating roses around 2003.<sup>23</sup> After then several of the greenhouses were rented to an orchid grower.<sup>24</sup> Then in 2006 the nursery property and the parcels with Sam Sakai's house at 223 S. 47th St. and the house at 4606 Florida Ave. were sold to the Richmond Community Redevelopment Agency which planned to develop the Miraflores Housing Development project on the Sakai property and on the adjacent property of the former Oishi and Maida-Endo nurseries.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

<sup>23</sup> PES Environmental Inc., *Phase I, Environmental Site Assessment: Miraflores Housing Development, Richmond, California* (23 July 2004), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Charlotte Sakai, Interview by Denise Bradley, 2 March 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Katie Lamont (Associate Director of Real Estate Development, Eden Housing, Inc), Email communication with Denise Bradley, 19 August 2010.

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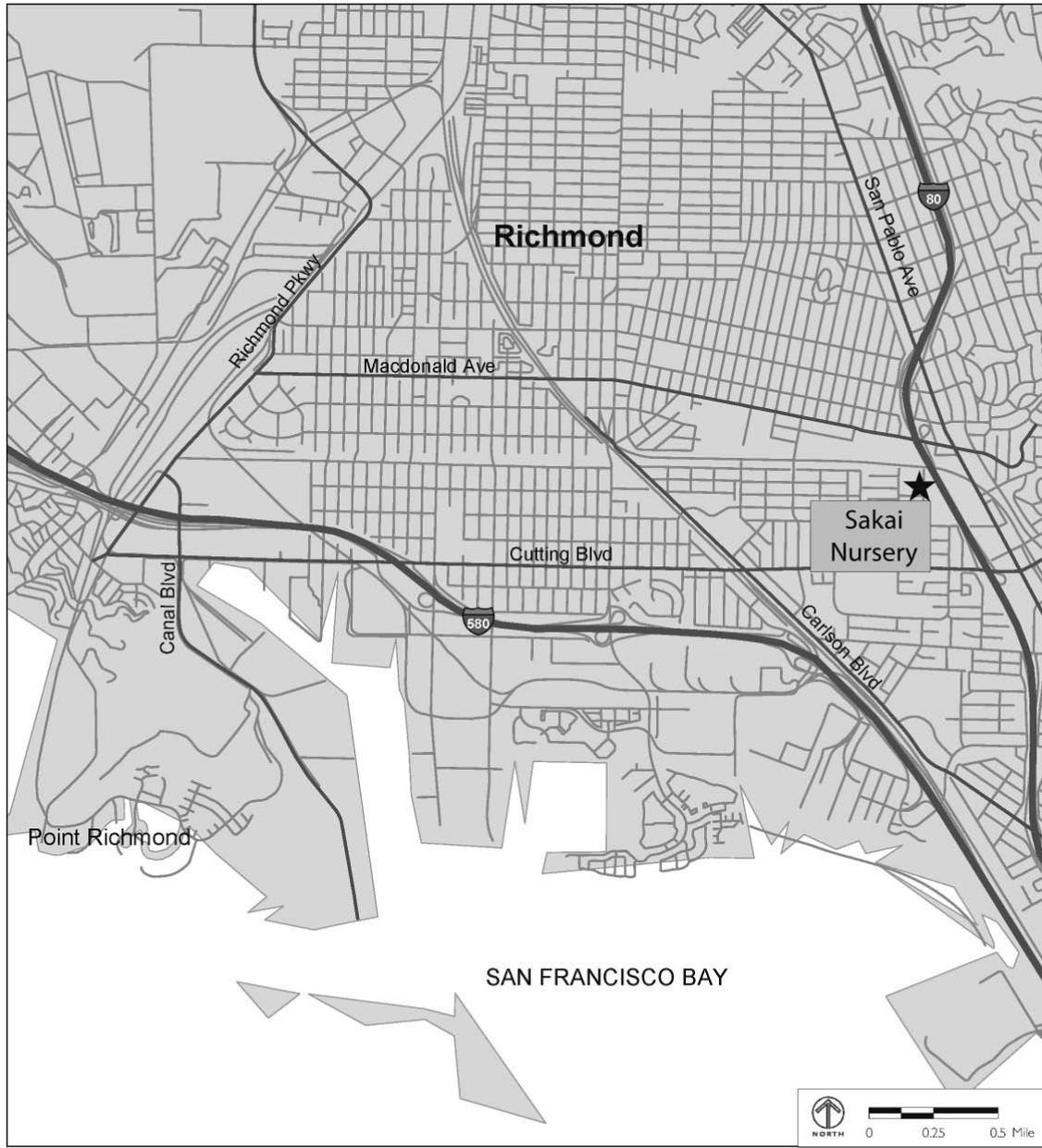
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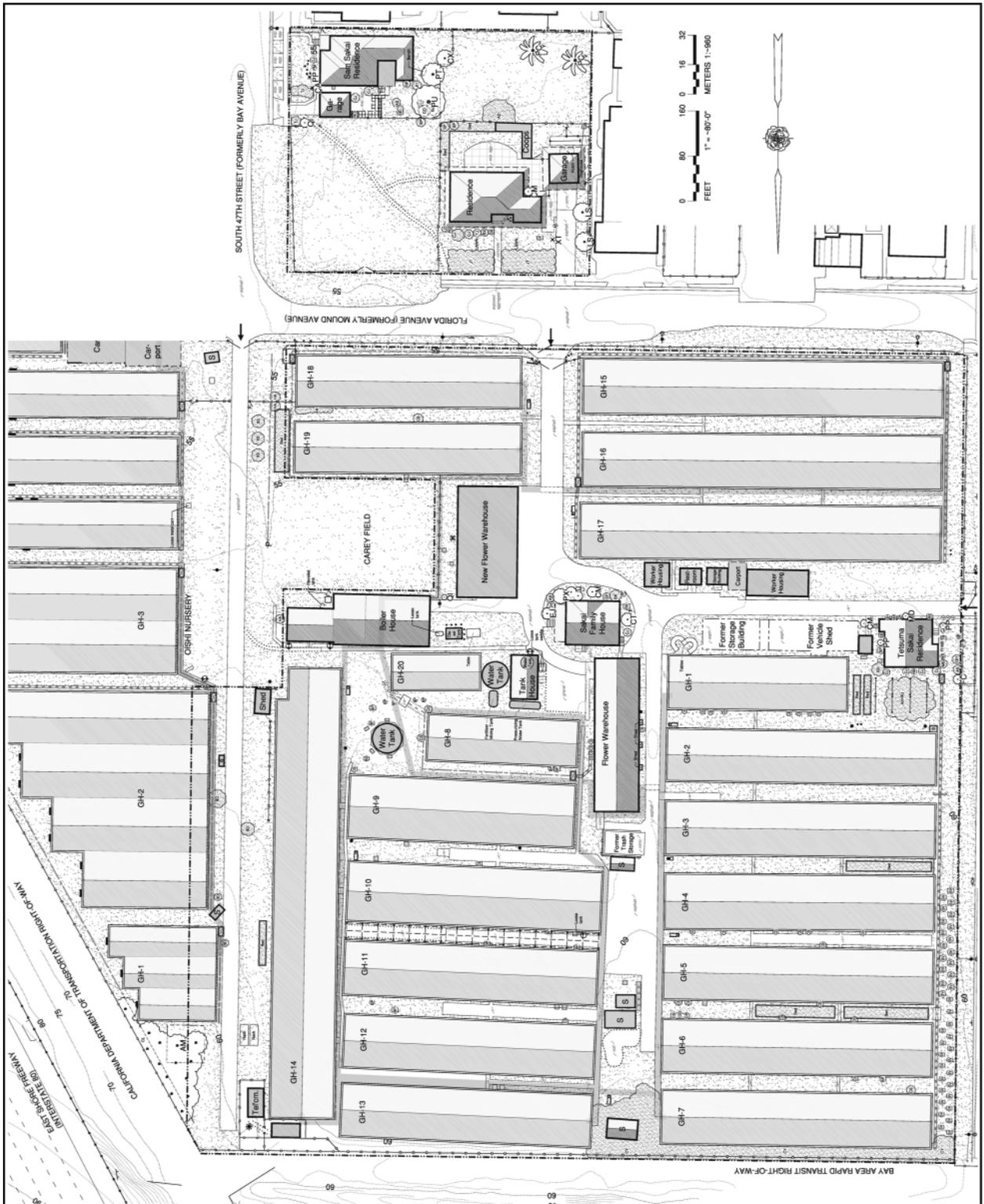
**Project Information:**

In 2006, the Sakai Nursery property was sold to the Richmond Community Redevelopment Agency which planned to develop the Miraflores Housing Development project, a mix of detached single-family houses and apartments, on the Sakai property and on the adjacent property of the former Oishi and Maida-Endo nurseries. The Miraflores project will result in the demolition of the greenhouses and the other buildings and structures on the Sakai Nursery which was determined to be a historic property by the California State Historic Preservation Officer in 2007. The Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) documentation of the Sakai Nursery was undertaken to fulfill one of the stipulations in the Memorandum of Agreement (dated 9 January 2008) between the City of Richmond and the California State Historic Preservation Officer related to the adverse effects under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act to the Sakai Nursery that will result from the construction of the Miraflores project. The HALS documentation was initiated by Linda Mandolini, Executive Director, Eden Housing Inc., for the City of Richmond, California. Project oversight was provided by Katie Lamont, Associate Director of Real Estate Development, Eden Housing, Inc. and Natalia Lawrence, Senior Development Project Manager, Richmond Community Redevelopment Agency. The drawings were prepared by Christine G. Patillo and Cathy Garrett, landscape architects, and Cate Bainton and Justine Hirsch of PGA design. Brian Grogan, Photography + Preservation, prepared the large-format photographs. The report on the nursery's landscape was prepared by landscape historian Denise Bradley, and the reports for selected historic buildings and structures were prepared by architectural historian Ward Hill. The historic contexts in these reports were based on historical research in a *Historic Architecture Evaluation* report prepared by Donna Graves (Historian), Ward Hill (Architectural Historian), and Woodruff Minor (Architectural Historian) in 2004. Sakai family photographs, collected by Donna Graves and transmitted to the archives of the Richmond Museum of History, the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park, and the Richmond Public Library, were an additional source of information. Separate from the HALS documentation, architectural drawings of the Sakai

family house, the tankhouse, and one representative greenhouse were prepared by Heidi Granke, Jason Wright, Lacy Bubnash, Kelly Wong, and Serpil Gezin, architects and conservators with Architectural Resources Group. Additionally, as part of the mitigation measures for the Miraflores project, the Sakai family house, the tankhouse, and one greenhouse will be rehabilitated and retained on the project site.



Location Map (Source: Miraflores Housing Development DEIR 2009)



Sakai Nursery Site Plan (Source: PGAdesign 2010)

Sketch Plan  
Sakai Nursery - Worker Housing  
Date Drawn: October 17, 2010

