Outside Lands

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OUTSIDE LANDS

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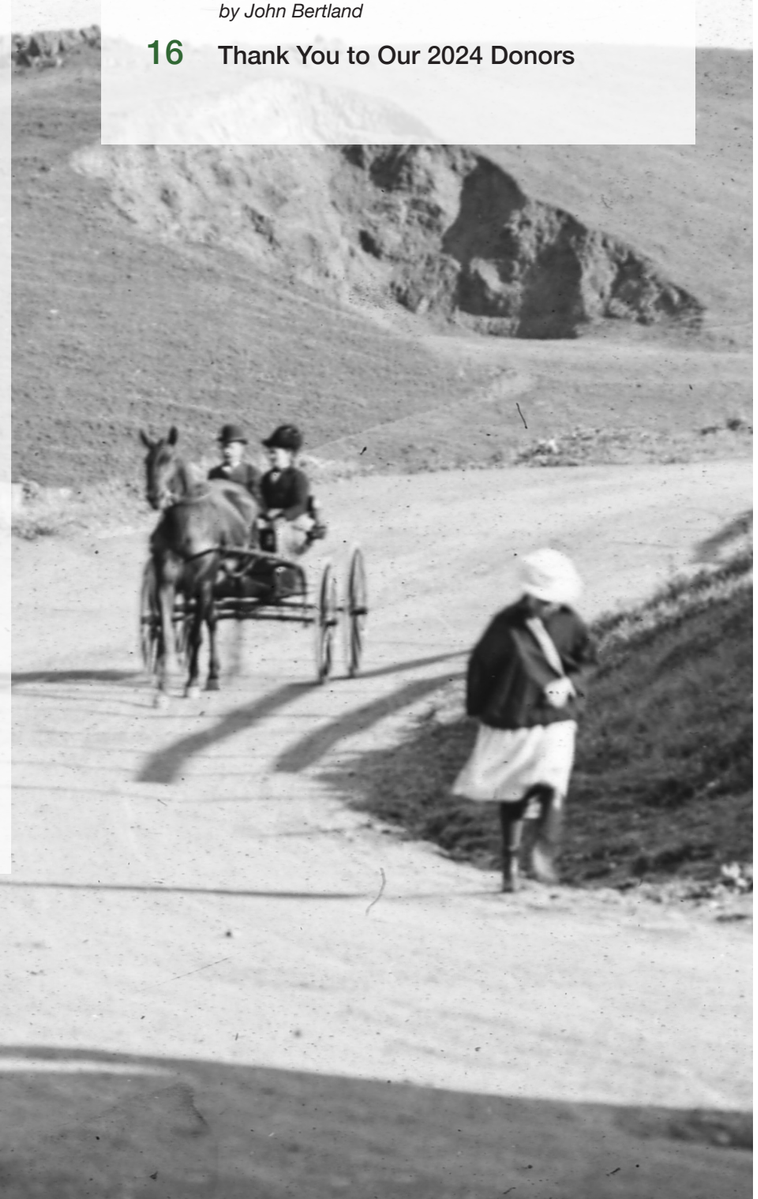
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Cover: Aerial view east of Crissy Field and the city beyond, January 5, 1934. (Photo by 15th Photo Section; courtesy of NARA)

Right: Corbett Road, April 27, 1902. (Photo by D.H. Wulzen; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp13.012)



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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

NICOLE MELDAHL



Well, dear members, I think it's safe to say that 2025 is off to a wild start. In a year that promises to be historic in unfathomable ways, we at WNP are choosing to focus on things that bring us joy and add value to San Francisco.

It's no secret that I love books and reading, so in January we launched WNP Book Club in partnership with Sean Connelly, Professor Emeritus of SF State's Humanities Department, Green Apple Books, and Problem Library. Our first featured book was Frank Norris's *Vandover and the Brute* (1914). The novel takes readers on a wild journey through San Francisco in the 1890s. It's neither his best work nor his most famous, but Norris's poetic descriptions of our city are instantly recognizable, transportive even, and this evocative placemaking that makes the past come alive is why we chose to highlight the novel.

It was also a conscious choice not to shy away from featuring Norris. Like many historical figures, he is not without his problems. Scholar Donald Pizer has written at length about a prevalent strain of antisemitism Norris shared with contemporary writers within the American Naturalism movement. Pizer spent his entire academic career ruminating on this and ultimately decided there was still value in reading Norris's work. Human beings are complicated because perfection is impossible and we absorb the bias of our time; this is why human history is messy and challenging. We can either discuss that openly or pretend it isn't true.

I was surprised to find commonalities between how Norris approached writing fiction and how we approach doing history in 2025. Norris felt that "the American writer, confronted by a huge new reading public easily influenced by fiction, should above all recognize his responsibility to be sincere, to deal with life as it is and to reveal the underlying realities of life as he finds it." With sincerity, WNP has always shared stories born out of a curiosity about the place in which we live.

In this issue, **Richard Brandi** reveals that the history of Portola Drive isn't nearly as straightforward as you would imagine; **Paul Judge** and **Margaret Ostermann** take us to the often overlooked Sunnyside Conservatory for ***Where in West S.F.?***; and first-time contributor **John Bertland** of the Presidio Trust shares the story of aerial photography from the 15th Photo Section at Crissy Field. Richard comprehensively researches his neighborhood to better understand it. Margaret explores San Francisco as she walks her dog through the city where she chose to settle, which also happens to be where Paul loved growing up. John dives deeper into the stories of the place where he works. And we all genuinely enjoy working together to share what we find through WNP—individual discoveries connecting to bring community history into focus.

Yes, we have fun as your friendly neighborhood nonprofit, but we also take what we do very seriously. It's an immense responsibility to record American history accurately while the concept of truth is treated as broadly negotiable. I'll return to Pizer, as he sought to define Norris's distinction between accuracy and truth: "Accuracy is a fidelity to particular detail; Truth is fidelity to the generalization applicable to a large body of experience." The fact-based stories we share are only meaningful when they resonate with all of you in ways that encourage reciprocity, so that you share your stories with us, and this history based on honest common ground can become something universally understood as true—showing San Francisco as it is, not as we wish it was. Check out ***Thank You to Our 2024 Donors*** to see a list of everyone involved in critically supporting WNP in this endeavor.

I'll end by saying thank you: it's an immense privilege that you've entrusted us to do valuable work. We simply couldn't do it without you.



WHERE IN WEST S.F.?

By Paul Judge and Margaret Ostermann

Though thousands of drivers whizz past it daily, its setback from the street and dark green shingle siding seem to camouflage the Sunnyside Conservatory within its lush garden. Hidden in plain sight, this neighborhood gem rewards those taking in their surroundings at a more modest speed.

Victoriously identifying our mystery photo were: **Matt Ayotte, Linda Feldman**, **Janice Pearcy**, **Martin Szeto, Pete Tannen, Stephanie Teel**, **Wallace Wertsch,** and **Margie Whitnah,** who recounted that her father "often drove that way to the old Sears in the Outer Mission. It always looked old and spooky and sort of out of place…I probably didn't dare stop there to explore it until my teens."

Owing to a valiant, decades-long community effort, the conservatory stands as a true urban survivor at 236 Monterey Boulevard. Initially it was the home to the west of the conservatory, at 258 Monterey, that brought William Merralls and his wife Lizzie to Sunnyside back in 1897.

William was plagued with a restlessly inventive mind. Though he later dabbled in early aviation and patented an automobile starter mechanism, it was his mining machinery business where he found success. During this career peak, the Merralls gradually acquired six adjoining lots, affording them the space to landscape extensively and build a conservatory to house their exotic plant collection. Though a myriad of conservatory construction dates abound, Amy O'Hair's extensive research for the Sunnyside History Project narrows the timeframe to 1902-1905 (visit their website for a much deeper history of the property).

Two years after William's 1914 death, his second wife Temperance found herself unable to keep up with expenses and relinquished the property to the bank. In 1919—the approximate year of our mystery photo—the unconventional property was purchased by a rather unconventional couple.



Angele Van Beckh with her dogs in front of Sunnyside Conservatory, circa 1919. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp26.1008)

Persistent neighborhood lore tells that Ernest and Angele Van Beckh were unaware their new real estate contained a two-story conservatory, until they needed to retrieve one of their dogs from the massively overgrown vegetation. More credible than that legend is the criminal fraud which financed the purchase of this tucked-away compound.

In an era rampant with self-proclaimed clairvoyants, Ernest took the practice a dubious step further when he



Charlie visited the Sunnyside Conservatory in 2020. (Courtesy of Margaret Ostermann)



View across Monterey Street to Sunnyside Conservatory in disrepair, 1980s. (Photo by Greg Gaar; courtesy of Greg Gaar / wnp33.03491)

ganged up with four other spiritualists. Ernest's underlings would advise their clients that mining fortunes were in their future, and then engineer "chance" encounters with him. Junk mining stocks he'd purchased for a few dollars were flipped for thousands, and most victims were too embarrassed by the swindle to contact police. In 1916 there were finally some arrests (and splashy newspaper headlines) but the cases were dismissed. The Van Beckhs stopped testing their luck with the law, and retreated to a quiet life in their Sunnyside oasis.

The amalgamation of lots fractured as Angele sold off sections in the decades following Ernest's death in 1951. Under its last owners, Robert and Ruth Anderson, the conservatory's longevity was truly put to the test. A paperwork fumble resulted in both city landmark designation in 1975 and a demolition permit in 1978. To the horror of neighbors, the east wing was swiftly destroyed before the error was caught and the permit revoked. The city purchased the property in 1980.

Though technically 'saved', the next two decades saw only minimal repairs to keep the structure from complete demise. Its resurrection came after the 1999 formation of the Friends of Sunnyside Conservatory, who fought diligently for a $4.2 million dollar restoration, completed in 2009. You'll now find lovingly tended gardens surrounding the conservatory, and though there are no plants inside, you can enjoy community events in this light-filled octagon, or rent it for your own private party. It's a favorite place for **Christy** to have a picnic lunch, or enjoy a free concert; and as reported by **Mike Jacobson**, it is the neighborhood polling location. The conservatory has truly seen its share of good and bad times at the hands of those who have prospered, neglected, connived, and finally resurrected it.

What west side feature is being constructed here?

Tell us what you think at chelsea@outsidelands.org



THE ROAD TO PORTO SUELLO

BY RICHARD BRANDI

View north from about 23rd Street of Corbett Road (today's Portola Drive), 1903. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp14.10604)

1852 map of San Francisco County showing the Spanish trail network linking the Presidio, Mission Dolores, and Daly City; Road to Porto Suello in red. (Map by Clement Humphreys; courtesy of Bancroft Library)



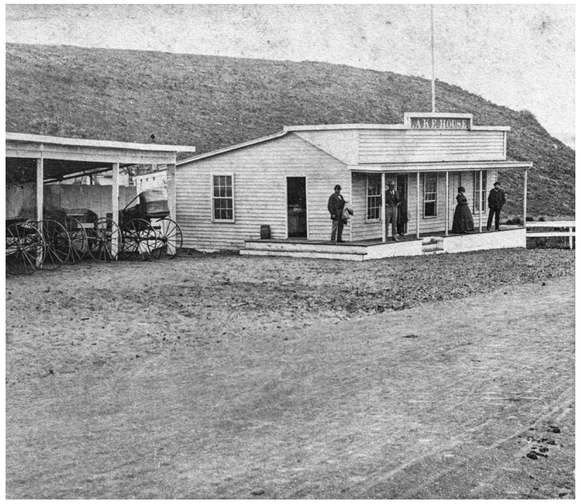
This article is the second in a series about early roads through the Outside Lands. During the 19th century, there were four ways to reach the Pacific Ocean traveling on horseback across the west side: the Central Ocean Road (dissolved into sand; see the October-December 2024 issue of this magazine), the Point Lobos Road (Geary Boulevard), the Ocean Road (Ocean Avenue), and the Mission and Ocean Beach Road (Portola Drive/Sloat Boulevard), originally called the Road to Porto Suello.

Cattle Trail

During the late 1770s, Spanish colonizers cut a trail over Twin Peaks that later became Portola Drive. The trail linked Mission Dolores to Daly City, where it joined the main road, El Camino Real. The Spanish called the trail "Road to Portezuela" because it ran through the narrow pass between San Bruno Mountain and the coastal hills in today's Daly City (*la portezuela* can mean "door" or "little pass"). American maps misspelled it as "Porto Suello."

The Road to Porto Suello was hilly and a secondary route compared to El Camino Real (today's San Jose Avenue). The native peoples working at Mission Dolores drove cattle over Porto Suello to the pastures on Twin Peaks and around Lake Merced. The backbone of California's economy under Spain was cattle—not for meat, but hides and tallow used for trading, as there was almost no local industry or manufacturing. It's hard to imagine, but today's Portola Drive was once littered with bloody cattle hides laid out to dry in the sun.

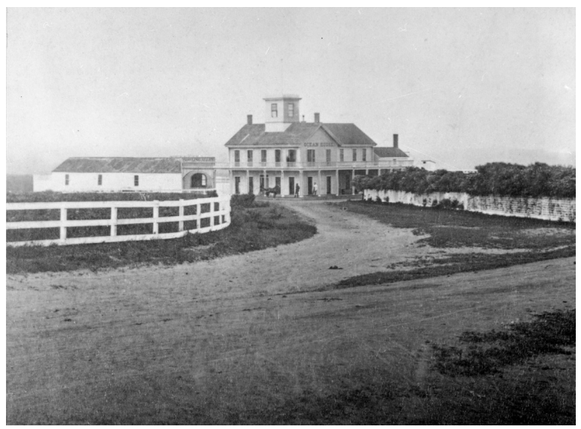
After gaining independence from Spain, the Mexican government began taking land from the missions and giving it to settlers. The best land, along the coast and inland valleys, went to about 800 well-connected



Lake House, circa 1870. (Photo by Carleton Watkins, Marilyn Blaisdell Collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp37.00829-L)

Californio families. On May 25, 1845, Mexican colonist José de Jesús Noé received 4,443 acres in the center of San Francisco, which he named Rancho San Miguel. It included what is now Mount Sutro, Twin Peaks, Edgehill, Diamond Heights, and Mount Davidson. The Road to Porto Suello bisected the rancho. Noé raised about 2,000 head of cattle and in 1848 built a large adobe house located at about today's Alvarado and Douglass Streets, on the Road to Porto Suello.

Noé was able to keep his rancho when California became part of the United States, unlike many others. He was among the first to receive patent confirmation (legal title) in 1852, so he could easily sell the land if he wanted to, and he did. His reasons for selling are unrecorded but may be due to the clash of cultures brought about by the Gold Rush. Noé's tight-knit community of less than a thousand was swamped with 62,000 young men who arrived by ship by April 1850, with more coming by land. An economy based on cattle hides was suddenly transformed into a gold-based, cash economy. Prices ballooned. In 1853, Noé sold all but seven acres of Rancho San Miguel to John Horner for $285,000—a fantastic sum at the time. He was not the first or the last to make a fortune in California land.



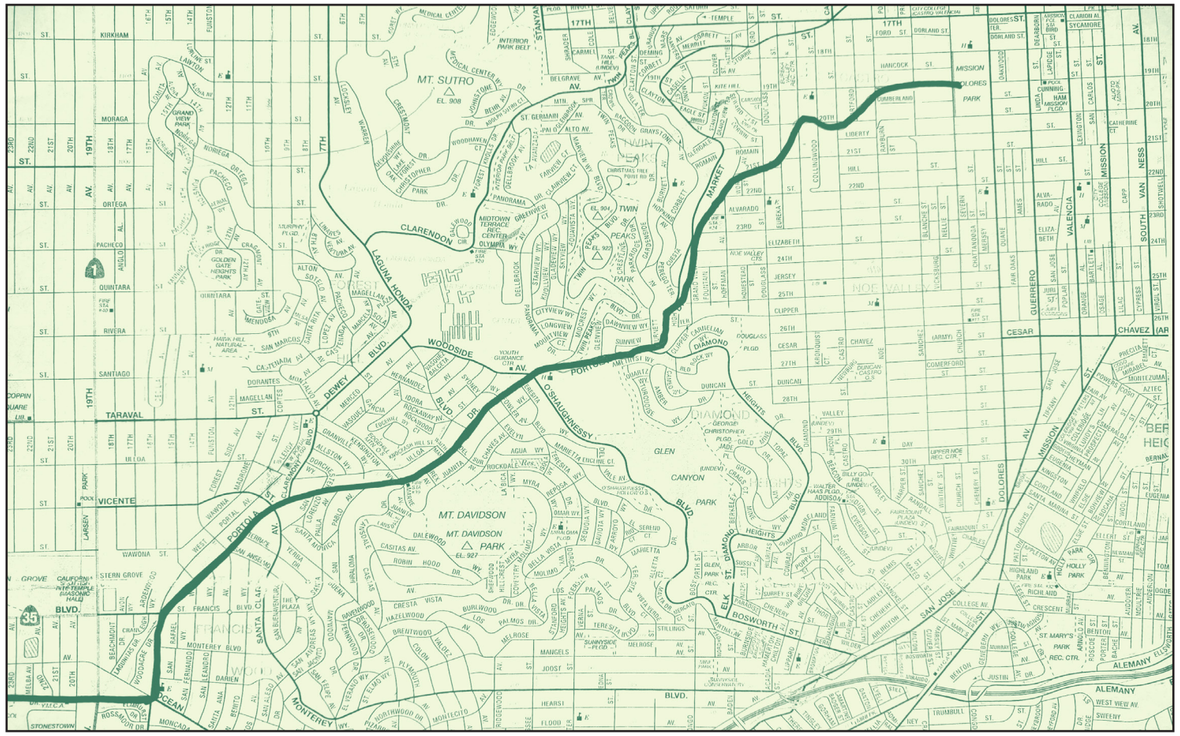
Ocean House, circa 1870. (Photo by Carleton Watkins; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp26.651)

Parties of Pleasure

In common with other Gold Rush towns, San Francisco teemed with saloons, bordellos, and gambling houses catering to young men. Even Mission Dolores became a saloon. In the early 1850s, two resorts opened on Lake Merced to serve the newcomers: Lake House and Ocean House. In contrast to the ordinary city bars and saloons, these resorts were rural and provided for hunting, fishing, and sailing. The *Daily Alta California* described Lake House: "Here you will find a lake, and in the lake a boat, and in them both at once you may sail to your heart's content…you may also roll at ten-pins…[and] the finest dinner that it is possible to provide in California."[1]

The larger Ocean House was built where Lowell High School stands now, on Eucalyptus Drive. Opened in August 1854, it boasted dining rooms, parlors, a billiard salon, a stable for a hundred horses, and an observation tower and balcony. Three fireplaces took the sting out of the damp fog and cold ocean winds. Advertisements assured that "Every accommodation can be had at this House for Parties of Pleasure, regular or transient Boarders or Families."[2] It's doubtful very many families frequented Ocean House. The main attractions were drinking, gambling, and hunting.

The Lake Merced resorts were very much 'out of town.' They could be reached by the Ocean Road (Ocean Avenue) via a long journey down San Jose Road almost to the county line; it was indirect but coaches from downtown made that trip daily. Stagecoaches did not serve the more direct Road to Porto Suello, which was steep, rutted, wet in the winter, and required crossing seasonal creeks. The manager of the Ocean House, James R. Dickey, thought he could attract more customers if he paved the old Spanish trail. Plus he could make money by charging tolls. He teamed up with



2008 map of San Francisco showing the route of the Mission and Ocean Beach Macadamized Toll Road. (Courtesy of California State Automobile Association)

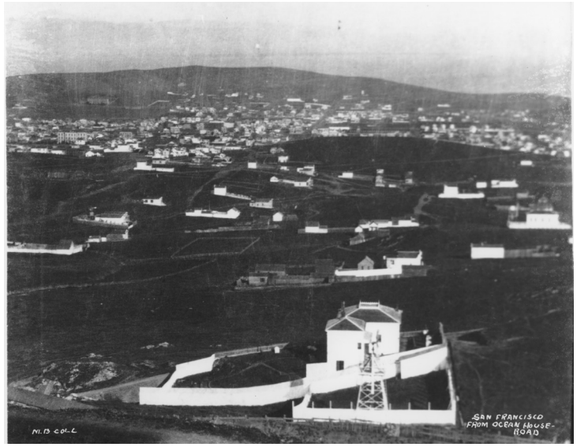
an ambitious and pugnacious attorney from New York, William S. Fitch. Soon Fitch bought out Dickey's interest in the road, hoping it would become a money maker. After all, the city's first toll road, the Mission Plank Road, had generated incredible profits with a return of nearly 60% per year.

The California legislature chartered toll roads, and Fitch easily got their permission, but he also needed the permission of the men who owned the Road to Porto Suello: French immigrants Francois L.A. Pioche and Julius B. Bayerque of Pioche, Bayerque & Co. They had just bought Rancho San Miguel, and with it the road. They intended to sell or develop the land and were quite capable of doing so; they were remarkable capitalists who invested in nearly everything, from French-imported goods to the Market Street Railway Company, Spring Valley Water Company, the Montgomery Block building, and mining operations and rancho lands throughout California. They were happy to give Fitch the right of way or an easement for free, in exchange for grading and fencing the road. A paved road would increase the value of Rancho San Miguel for resale.

The Mission and Ocean Beach Macadamized Toll Road

The original Road to Porto Suello went from Mission Dolores over Twin Peaks, tracing today's Portola Drive and Junipero Serra Boulevard south to Daly City. Fitch's version began at Mission Street and Eagle (19th Street), climbed through Eureka Valley, and followed today's Portola Drive and Junipero Serra Boulevard to where Fitch shortened the original road and turned it west along what is now Eucalyptus Drive, to reach the Lake Merced resorts. He named it the Mission and Ocean Beach Macadamized Toll Road. A macadamized road (named after its inventor John McAdam) is made up of layers of compacted, crushed rock and provides a smooth all-weather surface at a lower cost than wood planking or cobblestones.

Fitch hired engineers who built the road for $28,000. On June 12, 1862, the workers held a groundbreaking ceremony "in the old fashioned style" drinking "foaming beakers of Heidsick" (French champagne Piper-Heidsieck).[3] Work proceeded quickly with rock taken from the Red Rock Quarry on Edgehill (today's



View of Noe Valley, looking east from the Mission and Ocean Beach Road, circa 1870. (Photo by Carleton Watkins, Martin Behrman Negative Collection; courtesy of the Golden Gate NRA, Park Archives, GOGA 35346 / wnp71.2125)

Waithman Way, off Portola Drive). The road was 20 feet wide (some reports say 30 feet) and 4.5 miles long, with no more than an 8% grade, about the maximum for a horse and a wagon.

When the toll road opened in August 1862 the *Daily Alta* praised it as a big improvement over "the dusty and terribly cut up highway and precipitous hills" of the previous road.[4] But macadamized roads required a lot of labor to both build and maintain. Much of San Francisco's infrastructure during the 19th century was privately constructed and done haphazardly. It appears Fitch scrimped on quality, because his costs were lower than other macadamized roads, when they should have been higher due to the hilly slope that had to span three creeks at today's Midtown Terrace (Glenview and Portola), Miraloma Park (Marne/Kensington and Portola), and St. Francis Wood (San Anselmo and Portola). These creeks no longer flow on the surface.

Still, a paved road through Rancho San Miguel was good news for Pioche, Bayerque & Co., who were eager to sell land. Pioche had raised millions of dollars from French investors and had initially returned high profits, but like others, got into trouble during bank failures in the mid-1850s. Between 1862 and 1869, Pioche, Bayerque & Co. made a dozen land sales amounting to more than half of Rancho San Miguel. In 1867, they constructed Corbett Road (today's Corbett Avenue) through one of their subdivisions. This ran from 17th Street to 24th Street where it met the Mission and Ocean Beach Road. However, Bayerque died of tuberculosis in 1865. His death exposed the firm's shaky finances with liabilities of $4.3 million and assets of only $2.4 million.

Trouble with Tolls

While Pioche was unloading Rancho San Miguel, Fitch was having his own troubles. Traffic volumes were disappointing. Fitch suspended tolls for a while, which boosted traffic to 1,000 daily by March 1863, but this was the high point. The death knell was the opening of the Cliff House on July 4, 1863. The Lake Merced resorts served by the Mission and Ocean Beach Road were no match for the Cliff House's magnificent view of the Pacific and easy access from Portsmouth Square using the straight and level Point Lobos Toll Road (Geary Boulevard).

Even after the Lake Merced resorts closed, Fitch tried to extend his franchise. In 1872 he formed a new company and shortened the road so that it started at the junction with 24th and Corbett Streets, rather than at 19th and Mission. Developers were selling and burying the part of the road in Eureka Valley. By shortening the road, Fitch created the route of the present-day Portola Drive alignment. Fitch probably tried to extend his franchise to coax Pioche to buy him out. But the same year, Pioche committed suicide and the firm collapsed. Furthermore, toll roads were increasingly resented by the public. The *San Francisco Chronicle* claimed Fitch's tolls were exorbitant and that he failed to make repairs, resulting in a road that was in appalling condition.

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors reduced the road's tolls by 90%. Mayor Bryant argued that the city should buy the road, and summed up the sentiment of many:

> I am opposed to toll roads. Public opinion is against them. There is hardly a day when citizens do not ask me to get rid of them. We must remember, however, that they were made at great cost, in good faith, by permission of the city and county, and they have been useful. They have developed outside lands, and increased the value of taxable property. But I think the city and county should own all the roads within its boundaries.[5]

The *Daily Alta* argued against the purchase, saying the road lost $2,000–3,000 a year and the city couldn't make it free in fairness to the general taxpayer because it was seldom used. The paper argued that if people wanted to take the road to enjoy the "magnificent view of our city and bay" from the 500-foot pass (Burnett and Portola Drive), they could afford to pay a toll for the pleasure.[6]



View north toward Twin Peaks from Miraloma Park showing the tree line between Sutro's land (with the trees) and Leland Stanford's land (without); arrow marks Twin Peak Boulevard and Portola Drive, May 11, 1923. (SFPUC - Spring Valley Water collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp36.10059)

This is the first mention of the road offering scenic views. Nonetheless, in 1877 the city bought the Mission and Ocean Beach Road for $28,730 and abolished the toll. It was a hollow victory however, because the city maintained the road no better than Fitch. The road soon reverted to dirt. Then the next owner of Rancho San Miguel closed the road to the public.

Scenic Route

By the 1880s the Mission and Ocean Beach Macadamized Toll Road no longer went to the Mission, was not macadamized, and did not charge tolls. It was sometimes called the San Miguel Road, Old Ocean Road, or Mission Pass Road. Perhaps a few hardy tourists took historian John S. Hittell's advice for sightseeing: "The Mission Pass Road…has a good view of the city and bay."[7] When Hittell wrote his guidebook, he might have been unaware that the road's owner, Adolph Sutro, was discouraging people from using it. Sutro, a German Jewish immigrant who made a fortune in the Comstock Lode silver mines, purchased about 2,000 acres in 1880—including 1,200 acres of Rancho San Miguel and the old toll road.

Sutro thought about leasing the land for farming or ranching, but instead created a forest. He disliked the yellowish-brown coastal scrub and grasses and had a lifelong love of trees from his childhood in Aachen, Germany. In 1886, Sutro chaired California's first Arbor Day, and urged tree planting to beautify San Francisco. He turned much of the rancho's landscape of alien grasses (introduced during the Spanish and Mexican cattle-grazing periods) and surviving native plants into a dense forest of mostly eucalyptus. The forest ran from Mount Parnassus (today's Mount Sutro) to Ocean Avenue and covered most of Mount Davidson, Edgehill, and the western slopes of Twin Peaks. He closed the old Mission and Ocean Beach Road out of fear that trespassers would start a fire in a landscape dominated by flammable eucalyptus.

Things remained static on the old road until the Twin Peaks Tunnel was being constructed in 1914. Along with the tunnel, Market Street was extended from Castro Street up the slopes of Twin Peaks to meet at the junction with Corbett and 24th Streets. In 1914, the Board of Supervisors decided to rename the portion of Corbett Road from 25th Street to Sloat Boulevard "Portola Drive," in honor of Gaspar De Portolá. Although Portola Drive has been widened and straightened over the years, it still flows the course of the old Mission and Ocean Beach Macadamized Toll Road. For more on the history of Portola Drive, see the April-June 2021 issue of *Outside Lands.*

1. "Suburban," *Daily Alta California*, June 8, 1855.
2. "New Ocean House," *Daily Alta California*, August 24, 1854.
3. "The New Road to the Ocean House," *Daily Alta California*, June 13, 1862.
4. "New Ocean House Road," *Daily Alta California*, August 13, 1862.
5. *San Francisco Municipal Reports for the Fiscal Year 1879-1880*, 1037.
6. "Proposed Toll Road Purchase," *Daily Alta California*, September 28, 1877.
7. John S. Hittell, *A Guide Book to San Francisco* (1888), 38.

The 15th Photo Section at Crissy Field

By John Bertland

Aerial imaging is so ubiquitous today that we seldom give it a second thought. We have become accustomed to seeing the world from above: satellite maps on our phones, aerial footage on the news, and high-resolution drone videos in all our TV series. However, there was a time when seeing such views from the sky was a rare experience. In that earlier era, the 15th Photo Section of the U.S. Army Air Corps conducted pioneering aerial photography and mapping across the West, while based at Crissy Field in the Presidio of San Francisco from 1920 to 1936. Members of this unit captured hundreds of thousands of photographs, documenting cities, landscapes, coastlines, and military installations—many for the first time. A number of their images are part of the OpenSFHistory photo archive. The unit's efforts were part of a larger Army effort that established the groundwork for modern aerial mapping and reconnaissance and helped shape the future of aviation photography. They took images that were not only utilized for military purposes but also helped shape civilian infrastructure, scientific research, and national policy, offering an unprecedented view of the United States and beyond.



Mosaic map of the Presidio, September 7, 1927. (Photo by 15th Photo Section; courtesy of Presidio Trust)



Douglas O-2 Observation plane used by the 15th Photo Section, at Crissy Field, January 25, 1926. (Photo by 15th Photo Section; courtesy of John Bertland)

Army Aviation and Aerial Photography

The U.S. Army's interest in aerial photography dates back to the Civil War, when the Signal Corps experimented with reconnaissance balloons. By World War I, aerial photography had evolved from a rudimentary tool into an essential component of reconnaissance, battlefield mapping, artillery fire direction, and bomb damage assessment. Advancements in aerial cameras and photographic analysis continued into the postwar years, ensuring that aerial reconnaissance became a permanent aspect of both military strategy and civilian applications.

After the war, the U.S. demobilized and significantly reduced the size of its armed forces. Over the next 17 years, the Army Air Service (renamed the Army Air Corps in 1926) struggled with chronic underfunding, personnel shortages, and ongoing debates about its fundamental role: whether it served as a tactical service supporting ground forces or could function as an independent strategic force. Either way, service leaders acknowledged the potential of aerial photography and continued to support its development and the formalization of its practices. They also recognized that aerial photography was not merely a military tool but had applications in civilian life as well, and that collaboration with other government agencies helped justify their budgets.

Aerial mapping in cooperation with the U.S. Geological Survey emerged as a particular focus. At the beginning of the 1920s, less than half of the 3,000,000 square miles within the continental boundaries were mapped, and nearly all of the remaining area's maps needed revision. The Air Service estimated that its aerial surveys cut mapping costs by 35-75%, and were cheaper than commercial services being developed. Aerial survey also made it possible to map previously inaccessible areas. The technology was adapted for civilian infrastructure planning, land management, navigation, and disaster response.

The work required extraordinary precision. Pilots had to fly in perfectly straight lines at exact altitudes, while photographers operated complex multi-lens cameras through holes cut in aircraft floors. Crews learned everything from photographic techniques to the emerging science of photogrammetry: the art of making measurements from photographs. This period also marked the standardization of mosaic mapping. By the late 1920s, these pioneers had pushed the technology beyond its wartime origins, developing capabilities for night photography and high-altitude mapping.

The 15th Photo Section

In 1919, the Air Service chose Crissy Field in the Presidio as the site of an air coast defense station to support the Coast Artillery Corps in the Bay Area. The station's principal missions were to provide observation for the artillery practice of the Harbor Defenses of San Francisco, support training, conduct liaison flights, perform reconnaissance, and photography. Only two units were stationed there for its entire operational period (1921-1936): the 91st Observation Squadron and the 15th Photo Section. Both were attached to the Third Division in the Ninth Corps Area, the regional command headquartered at the Presidio. The 15th Photo Section specialized in aerial photography and mapping. The airfield's location made it ideal for both coastal reconnaissance and broader photographic missions across the western United States.

The 15th Photo Section arrived at Crissy Field in 1920, a year before the air station was officially activated. The unit consisted of about one officer and 20 men. It shared with the 91st Squadron surplus De Havilland DH-4 planes, which were essentially flying boxes of wood and fabric. It was one of about 15 to 20 photo sections operating in the U.S. and overseas territories during this time. The unit had been organized during World War I and had seen active combat in northern France. Over the following years, the section enhanced its expertise, contributing to the development of specialized techniques for capturing high-altitude images, improving image clarity, and refining the process of aerial mosaic creation. Their work provided vital intelligence for both military operations and civil planning, ensuring that aerial photography remained an invaluable tool for a wide range of applications.

The section's photographic work encompassed both aerial and ground-based photography. They documented new facilities, buildings, and equipment; captured portraits and group photos; and recorded special events. Aerial photographs comprised both vertical images for mosaic mapping and oblique views of locations and facilities. The unit produced both still pictures and moving films. It developed and printed photos at its lab at Crissy Field and in its mobile photo truck and trailer while in the field. As a sample of its work, in fiscal year 1928 (a low year for mapping), the section made over 7,200 negatives and 25,300 prints, and mapped 420 square miles.

The 15th Photo Section focused on mapping and surveying locations for military and U.S. Geological Survey use. Its early work included creating photo mosaic maps of Forts Baker and Barry in August 1920. The next year, it mapped San Francisco and surrounding cities, then surveyed the entire Pacific coast. Over time, it mapped much of the Army's Ninth Corps Area: California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

Both mapping and oblique photos contributed to the section's efforts to survey locations for military and aviation planning. A significant portion of its work focused on documenting Army and Navy installations. The unit also aided civilian urban and aviation infrastructure planning by photographing sites for new municipal airports and evaluating potential locations for emergency landing sites and future airfields. The swift and precise mapping capabilities enabled by aerial photography greatly influenced the development of municipal aviation infrastructure. These location images were also valuable for navigation, as the section compiled photographs of regional airfields and kept them in San Francisco for pilots needing reference materials for landings and route planning.



Aerial of Fleishhacker Pool, Ocean Beach, and Great Highway, November 16, 1924. (Photo by 15th Photo Section; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.3347)

In addition to mapping and surveying, the 15th Photo Section undertook various other missions. One of its key responsibilities was to assist with training exercises for ground units, capturing images for target practice and assessing the accuracy of artillery and aerial bombing exercises. Aerial photography was also used to evaluate defensive measures, such as camouflage at coastal defense installations. The unit documented large-scale military exercises, as these increased after 1930, including aerial maneuvers over San Francisco and Sacramento.The section also contributed to documenting experimental technology, training other units, and taking part in recruiting drives.

Public outreach was a major focus of the Air Corps throughout this period, as it sought support from the public and political leaders. Many of its images were shared with newspapers across the nation, giving San Franciscans and others their first views of their cities from the sky. Some photos were given directly to the institutions depicted, such as schools and hospitals. The 15th Photo Section regularly participated in Army air shows and races at Crissy Field and other airfields. It

Finding 15th Photo Section Photos

Given the sheer number of prints the section created over the years, it is not surprising that they appear in collections across the country. However, the section is often not identified as the creator of the photos. OpenSFHistory hosts several online, and many are available through the National Archives and Records Administration website. Physical copies are usually identified easily because "15th Photo Section" is stamped on the back. When looking at digital copies, there is typically a series of numbers in parentheses in the lower left corner of the image. The middle parenthesis denotes the date and time. If it is a photo from the 15th Photo Section, the first parenthesis will end with the number 15.



Aerial view of the Legion of Honor in Lincoln Park, Fort Miley, and Lands End, January 11, 1928. (Photo by 15th Photo Section; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.2666)



Aerial view of Civic Center, October 16, 1932. (Photo by 15th Photo Section; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.4693)



Aerial view of Telegraph Hill, September 15, 1933. (Photo by 15th Photo Section; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.4692)



Aerial view west over San Francisco, October 31, 1927. (Photo by 15th Photo Section; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.2663)

was also frequently called upon to document significant aviation events. The unit was present to record Lt. Russell L. Maughan's completion of his "dusk-to-dawn" transcontinental flight at Crissy Field on June 23, 1924. The arrival of the Army's Round-the-World fliers at Crissy Field in September 1924 was another historic moment recorded through its lenses. Three years later, in 1927, the section photographed the departure of the first non-stop flight from the Bay Area to Hawaii, a milestone in transpacific aviation.

The unit also sought publicity through "stunts" that showcased the potential of new aerial photographic technologies. On June 16, 1922, Lt. Robert E. Selff and Pvt. Alfred A. Winters captured images of the Matson liner *Matsonia* departing San Francisco. Within 35 minutes, the film was developed at Crissy Field, printed, and flown back out over the ship, where 100 copies were dropped to passengers on board.

The 15th Photo Section supported civilian agencies that needed aerial mapping for development, infrastructure, and conservation efforts. By the mid-1920s, the demand for aerial photography in civilian projects had increased significantly. Aside from the U.S. Geological Survey, the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey relied on aerial imagery for charting coastlines. The Bureau of Reclamation used the section's aerial photography to survey potential reservoir sites. The National Park Service requested aerial surveys to inform park development, including the first aerial survey of Yosemite National Park in October 1928. The U.S. Forest Survey used aerial imagery to evaluate road construction through national forests.

The section documented disasters, aiding damage assessments and recovery efforts. In September 1923, the 15th Photo Section photographed the area burned in the Berkeley fire, creating detailed fire maps that helped evaluate the extent of the destruction. For the Forest Survey, the section photographed burned regions and areas affected by insect infestations, contributing to the study of fire spread patterns and the long-term effects of wildfires. These images assisted researchers and government agencies in developing more effective fire prevention and response strategies, showcasing the broad applications of aerial photography beyond its military origins.

Scientific research also benefited from the 15th Photo Section's aerial photography. In April 1923, Lt. William C. Goldsborough used aerial imagery to pinpoint the location of an eruption point and two newly formed blowholes at Mount Lassen, shortly after its eruption. The unit collaborated with Lick Observatory in 1930 to photograph a solar eclipse from 12,000 feet over Sonoma, capturing images that contributed to astronomical research.

Probably the most distinctive scientific mission undertaken by the 15th Photo Section was its work in aerial archaeology. In January 1930, the unit conducted a mission for the Smithsonian Institution to document the prehistoric Hohokam canal systems near Phoenix, Arizona. The section captured high-resolution aerial images of ancient irrigation networks that had been in use between AD 600 and 1450. These canals were rapidly disappearing due to modern development and farming expansion. The aerial survey provided archaeologists with a comprehensive view of the extensive canal networks, documenting them before they were permanently altered or lost, thus preserving a visual record of an ancient engineering marvel.

Technological advancements in aviation and photography increased the section's capabilities over time. Throughout the 1920s, its pilots typically used De Havilland observation planes modified for photographic purposes. In July 1930, it received a Fairchild YF-1, the first aircraft designed specifically for aerial photography. It featured an enclosed cabin, room for two cameras and two men, and oxygen tanks for high-altitude work at a time when pressurized cabins were not yet standard. These features enabled operations at an unprecedented ceiling of 20,000 to 21,000 feet, tripling the area covered per exposure. The plane also facilitated aerial mapping projects in the mountainous regions of the Northwest, where planes had to fly high above the mountain winds and turbulence to maintain the necessary consistent and level altitude. Despite these advancements, the Army General Staff terminated the Corps' use of the YF-1 in 1932, finding it of limited value as it was not armed for combat. The Corps continued using modified observation aircraft until World War II.

Conclusion

By 1936, Crissy Field's limitations as an airfield were widely recognized. Fog, crosswinds, and the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge rendered its continued operation impractical. Furthermore, Army Air Corps leaders had largely embraced the doctrine of strategic bombing as the primary role of military aviation. While aerial photography and reconnaissance remained essential, coordination with coastal defense became less of a priority, stripping Crissy Field of its main purpose. In 1935, the Army constructed the much larger Hamilton Field in San Rafael and announced in February 1936 that Crissy Field would close as an airfield on June 20.



Hohokam canals, January 1930. (Photo by 15th Photo section; courtesy of NARA)

The Army reassigned the 15th Photo Section and the 91st Observation Squadron to Fort Lewis, Washington. On June 27, 1936, the 15th Photo Section's two photographic trucks departed the Presidio for the last time. The section continued its work until June 1, 1937, when it was demobilized and its personnel transferred to other units. The 91st Observation Squadron survives today as the 91st Cyberspace Operations Squadron.

The 15th Photo Section at Crissy Field was at the forefront of early aerial photography and mapping. Its work helped establish this field as an essential tool for both military and civilian applications. By capturing aerial views of landscapes that had never been photographed from above, they helped redefine how people understood geography, infrastructure, and aviation. Today, as we navigate the world using satellite imagery and drone photography, it is worth remembering the aviators and photographers who first looked down on the landscape and saw not just terrain, but a new frontier. Their legacy endures not only in military archives but also in the maps, photographs, and records that continue to inform and inspire future generations of geographers, engineers, and historians.









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Second Saturdays at 2pm: Open Reference @ Problem Library

Stop by Problem Library's gallery and office to see selections from the WNP collection and peruse research materials related to whatever we're into that month. Nicole Meldahl will be available to assist with all your local history needs over a convivial cup of tea, and we encourage you to bring whatever you're working on right now, as well. You'll also be able to chat with folks from Problem Library about their work supporting young Bay Area creatives. Free!

Sat Apr 12 at 6pm: WNP Book Club @ Problem Library

Sean Connelly and Nicole Meldahl will lead a salon-style book discussion centered around our March/April Book Club selection: Vendela Vida's We Run The Tides, set in 1980s Sea Cliff. Feel free to join us, even if you didn't read the book! Free but RSVP is appreciated.

Wed Apr 16 at 7pm: WNP Film Club @ 4 Star Theater

John Martini and Chelsea Sellin celebrate movies filmed on location in San Francisco; April's screening is the 1958 crime drama *The Lineup*. Pre-film presentation will provide background about the movie's featured locations. $15 General Admission, $12.50 for seniors and children.

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