



Since 1971

THE GATE POST

◆ July – September, 2013 ◆

Vol. XXXIX, No. 4

P.O. Box 1002, MENLO PARK, CALIFORNIA 94026-1002

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Violet Beds, Sherwood Hall Nursery, circa 1890



The area as it looks today.

Another Rare Moment

Julie Cain, Program Co-ordinator for Heritage Services at Stanford University, was doing research at the Association Office on the Hopkins Estate. When asked if she would write an article for the Gate Post, she graciously said yes. Following is the article on the Nursery at the Hopkins Estate. The two photos—one taken circa 1890 and the other taken in 2010—are of the same area, one of which should be familiar. 🌸

Nursery Aspect of the Hopkins Estate

By Julie Cain

During the 1850s, many Californians who created great wealth through banking, mining, railroad-ing, agriculture and real estate development built summer homes on the San Francisco peninsula.

These palatial estates were characterized by their opulent luxury and park-like landscapes. William E. Barron and Milton S. Latham, two successive owners of a 280-acre estate in Menlo Park, each contributed to making their property their personal version of a California Eden. Timothy Hopkins, the third owner, was not content to merely live in a floral paradise. From 1891 to 1899, he attempted to make the estate self-sustaining by transforming the outlying acreage into growing grounds for one of San Mateo County's largest commercial nurseries. Renowned for growing blooms for the cut-flower market, Hopkins's nursery also produced trees, plants, seeds and bulbs of all types.

Known during Hopkins's long tenure (1883-1936) as Sherwood Hall, the property had already earned

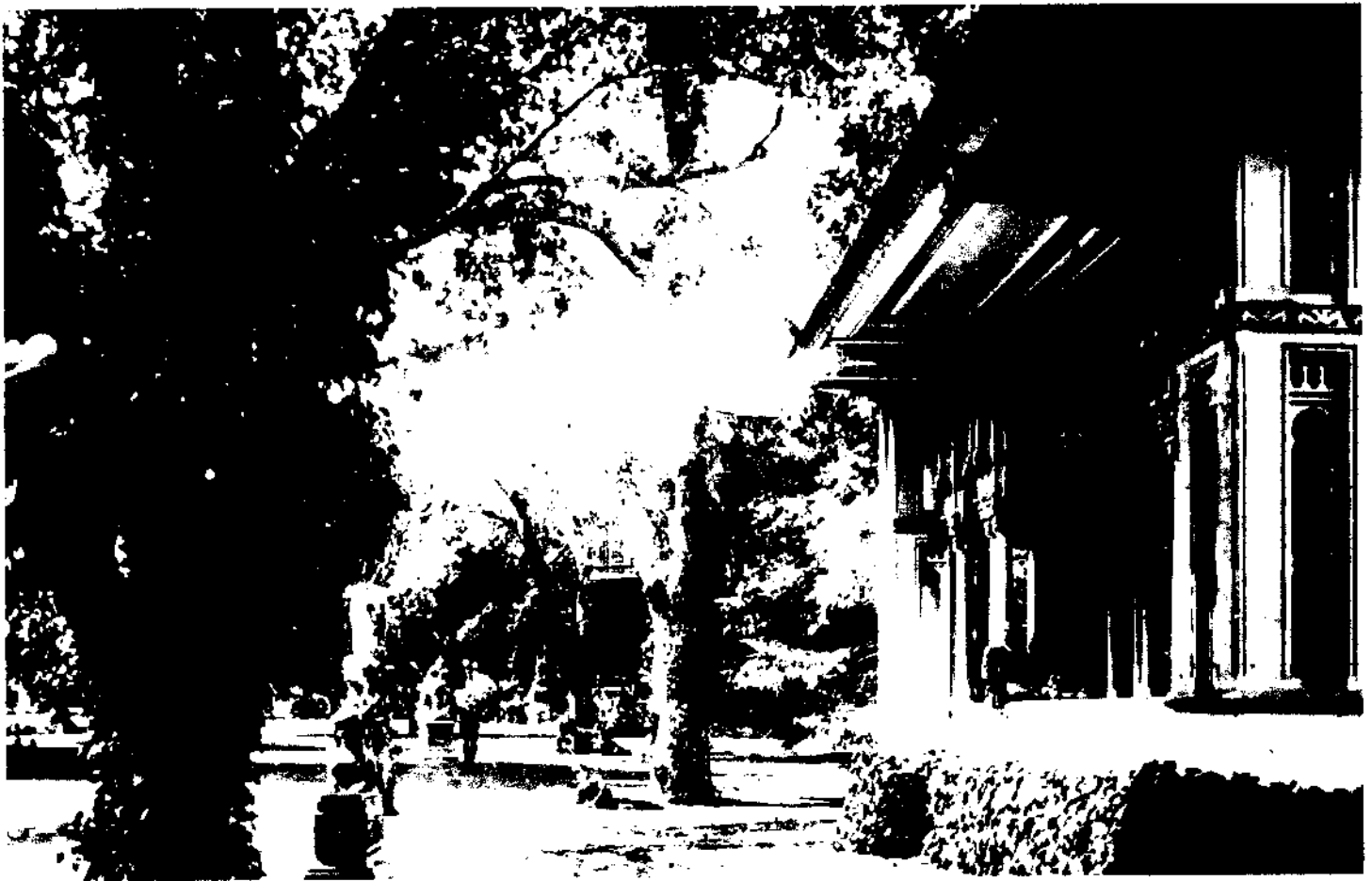
a reputation as one of the most beautiful and elaborately landscaped estates on the peninsula long before he owned it. Once an open oak savannah, the boundaries were San Francisquito Creek, Alma Street, Ravenswood Avenue and Middlefield Road. Barron, aware that California's Mediterranean climate didn't produce enough rain year-round to keep lawns looking green, ran seven-inch pipes from the Corte Madera Water Company reservoir to provide irrigation as needed. He told Amelia Ransome Neville, a San Francisco socialite, "that a green velvet carpet over the land, frequently renewed, would be less costly, but he had a preference for grass."

Latham, who purchased the estate after Barron's death in 1871, promptly set about refurbishing the mansion and just as promptly burned it down when he ordered fires built in the numerous fireplaces to dry out fresh plaster applied to the walls. Latham then hired noted architect David Farquharson to

design a French Empire-style three-story mansion complete with a ninety-eight foot tower as well as a matching stable and carriage house. Latham, known for his fine collections of paintings, drawings and sculpture, extended his love for beautiful objects to include French cast-iron, bronze and marble statuary, along with urns and fountains for the grounds. Most of the statuary was of classical figures but Latham also had a sense of



Sherwood Hall Nursery Co's Violet Beds at Menlo Park.



humor. The local newspaper noted: "Mr. Latham is decidedly a wag. In big letters he stuck up here and there on his outer fences 'Look out for the Bull Dogs.' They are on the grounds, great metal ones."

Latham died in 1882 with his sister-in-law, Henrietta Dwight, holding title to the estate as collateral for an unpaid \$300,000 loan. Ariel Lathrop, Leland Stanford's brother-in-law and manager of his nearby Palo Alto estate and stock farm, bought the property for \$205,000 in April 1883 and deeded it over to Mary Frances Hopkins, widow of Mark Hopkins, five months later. Her adopted son, Timothy Hopkins and his wife, Mary ("May") Kellogg Hopkins (a favorite niece of Mrs. Mark Hopkins) moved into the house in 1883 and initially lived there year-round.

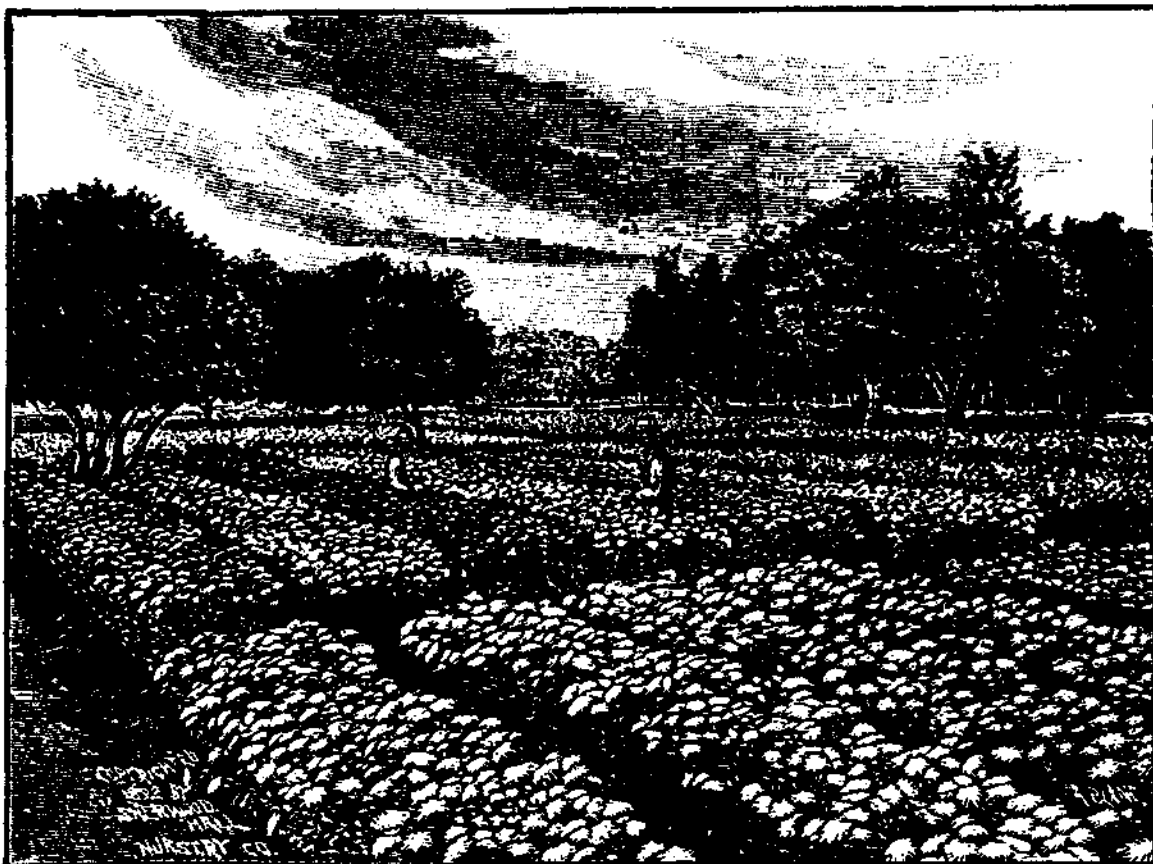
Both Timothy and May took full advantage of all the landscape improvements Barron and Latham had made, which included an artificial trout pond, a deer enclosure, a large aviary with a separate canary house, a classical "Ruin" composed of marble columns shipped from Pompeii and, most quixotic of all,

a Moorish temple variously described as a smoking kiosk, a summer house, a tea house and a pagoda. But what Timothy was most enamored of was the large greenhouse left by Mollie Latham, Latham's widow. Over the next few years, he would build another twenty-four greenhouses to indulge his love of floriculture and horticulture. In 1886, when he hired Irish gardener Michael Lynch to oversee his estate grounds, Hopkins took the first steps towards expanding his amateur interest into a commercial venture. Like other local estate owners, he used both white labor and Chinese labor. The Menlo Park Anti-Chinese League paid Hopkins a visit in 1886, insisting that he fire all of his Chinese laborers, claiming they were taking work from more deserving white workers. Hopkins refused their demands and insisted he would continue to hire both whites and Chinese, as he had been doing since 1883. The committee members backed down but the issue remained hot, with Hopkins being called out in the San Francisco papers for supporting Chinese laborers well into the 1890s.

Hopkins opened the Sherwood Hall Nursery on 1 April 1890. Newspaper accounts not only identified the Chinese labor presence, they also provided detailed descriptions of the operation. Often waxing heavily on the romantic side when describing the great old oaks and the sheer beauty of 200 acres of flowers in bloom—unable to decide if the colors or the fragrances were the more compelling—they also provided salient facts. By 1890, Hopkins had five acres of violets pro-

ducing four varieties of blooms for market six months out of the year. Sweet peas took up fifteen acres (later expanded to one hundred acres to produce both cut flowers and seed), with over 10,000 chrysanthemums growing alongside them. Of the 150 varieties of roses, some were grown outside while others resided in the greenhouses to continue the supply of blooms through the winter months. Hopkins also had over 10,000 carnations growing under glass, in addition to poinsettias, ferns, China asters and various bulbs such as hyacinths, tulips and tuberose. The twenty-five greenhouses required “four big furnaces for the hot-water heating apparatus, and entail the purchase of from 200 to 300 tons of coal annually” and a fifteen-horsepower gas engine pumped water from artesian wells into the two water towers. Watering the flowers took up to 200,000 gallons of water per day.

The flower fields received so much attention in the press, in late 1893 Hopkins decided to change the business name from the Sherwood Hall Nursery Company to the Sunset Seed and Plant Company



Sherwood Hall Nursery Co's Chrysanthemum Fields at Menlo Park.

to better reflect the broad range of plants and seed available, in addition to the cut-flower trade.

On 28 May 1893 the meteoric success of the venture was noted in the *San Francisco Call*. Not only was Hopkins dominating the cut flower market and other nursery concerns in San Francisco, he was managing to ship both cut flowers and seed to the Eastern United States and Europe. He received the only award given out for sweet peas at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and his nursery entries consistently won prizes at the local flower and horticultural shows. While 1893 was a banner year in terms of selling products, clients were feeling the pinch of the Cleveland Depression and were slow to pay their bills. Hopkins stopped paying his workers, most of whom continued to receive room and board on the estate. By January 1894, the white workers went on strike. James Sproule, manager of the Sunset Seed and Plant Company, traveled down from San Francisco to Menlo Park on the train, paid off the strikers and then fired them all. He replaced the men with other local laborers; the Chinese who worked

for Hopkins do not appear to have been part of the strike or the subsequent discharge.

By June 1894, Hopkins had decided to lease out the cut-flower end of the business and to concentrate on plants, seeds and fruit production. He quietly sold his interest in the Sunset Seed and Plant Company in 1897, but continued to grow fruit and enter local flower shows, as well as sponsoring prizes, for many years to come. While the effort did not make the estate sustainable, Hopkins had achieved his other goals. He had indulged his love of floriculture and horticulture at a level those less wealthy could only dream about, and his initial commercial success did much to raise California floriculture and horticulture in the eyes of the nation. Both the Sherwood Hall Nursery Company and the Sunset Seed and Plant Company introduced numerous new varieties of various plants over the years, realizing Hopkins's desire for "excellence of stock and all flowers true to name" being "the cardinal principles of the venture."

Hopkins left his estate to Stanford University at his death in 1936 with the caveat his widow be allowed to live there until her demise. With her passing in 1941, the house and outbuildings (with the exception of the gatehouse) were razed at the end of 1942.

The gatehouse is still flanked by magnificent coast live and valley oaks today, some in a state of genteel decline due to their greatly advanced age. They are the most prevalent feature of the landscape today, clear evidence of the beauty that drew Barron, Latham and Hopkins to the property in the first place. Latham's gatehouse, later modified by Hopkins in 1906 (and by others during WWII), now belongs to the Menlo Park City Council and is used to house a local non-profit organization. All of the Menlo Park City Council offices, including

the police station, currently stand on the former estate grounds.

The Menlo Park Community Library takes up one small corner where the violets once grew, and two neighborhood parks boast several heritage tree specimens. They, and the lawns growing between them, are reminiscent of the estate's park-like setting that existed between 1865 and 1942. Barron's trout pond is long gone but another artificial pond is now home to several contented ducks. The United States Geological Survey and the Stanford Research Institute take up one large quarter of the original property and the Sunset Publishing Company (no relation to Sunset Seed and Plant Company) with its demonstration gardens went up at the corner of Middlefield Road and San Francisquito Creek. A large and quiet residential neighborhood—with streets named Hopkins, Sherwood and Thurlow winding through it—takes up what remains of the estate grounds. El Palo Alto still stands near San Francisquito Creek, and when a train pulls into the tiny Menlo Park Depot, it is not hard to imagine all those railroad cars from over one hundred years ago loaded down with flowers and heading towards San Francisco.

Sources: Menlo Park Historical Society Archives, Stanford University Archives, Redwood City Library History Room, San Mateo County History Museum Archives, and Sherwood Hall and Sunset Seed and Plant Company catalogs.

Menlo Park Historical Association would like to thank Julie Cain for this article on the Hopkins Estate. Julie is Program Coordinator for Heritage Services, Land Use and Environmental Planning at Stanford University. ♡

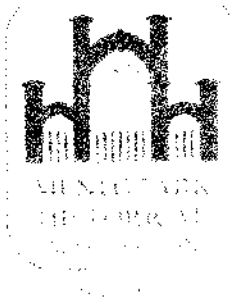
*Welcome to our
two new members:*

*Resa King
Norma Lyle*



Thank you

MPHA would like to thank Martha Lancestremere for the monumental job of keeping the clipping files in good order and up to date. ♡



P.O. Box 1002
Menlo Park, CA 94026-1002
Phone: (650) 330-2522
mphistorical@yahoo.com
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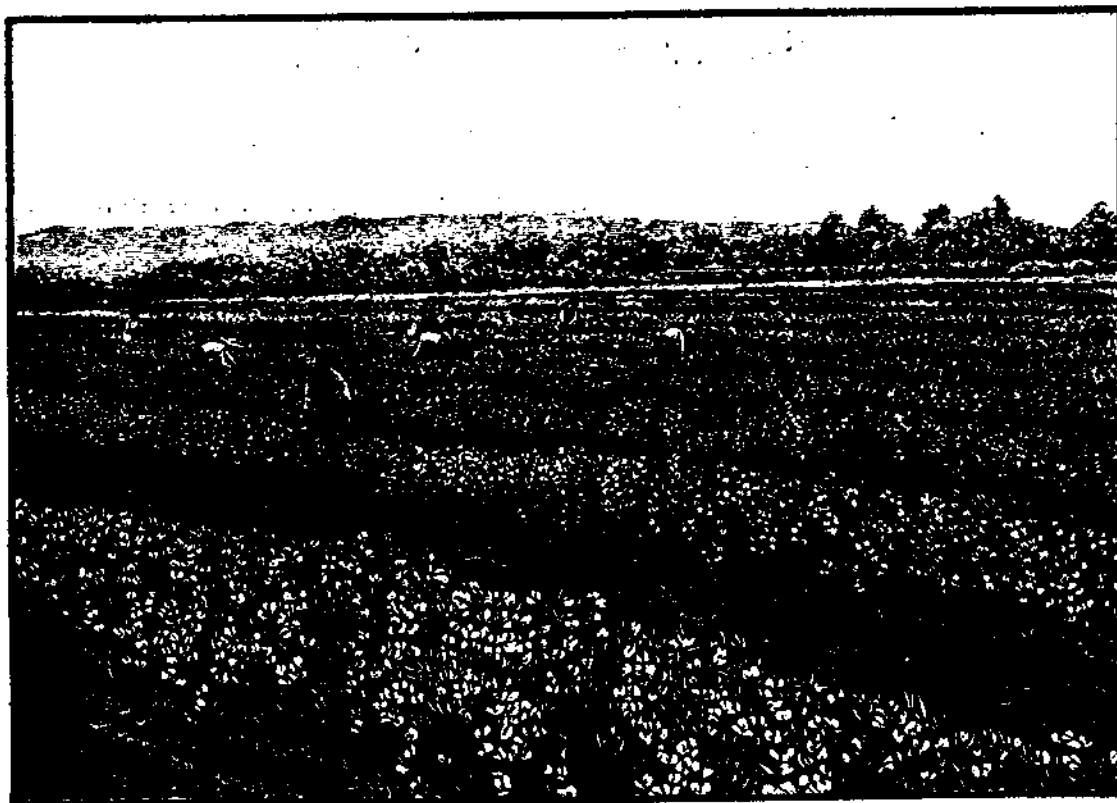
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Sherwood Hall Nursery Co's Sweet Pea Fields at Menlo Park.