

## REPORT ON 1620 COWPER STREET RESIDENT, PALO ALTO

by Roland C. Davis, Volunteer  
August 1998

### PREFACE

This is a research report on the above-designated residential property prepared pursuant to instructions set forth by consultants Dames and Moore who were retained by the City of Palo Alto to update the City's Historic Inventory. The instructions to volunteers referred to are entitled Volunteer Tasks Eleven, Research on Individual Properties.

A forewarning is perhaps appropriate concerning this report. It will undoubtedly turn out to have gone somewhat beyond the normal scope of what is expected. This is so because this volunteer researcher happens to be the owner of the property and the home being researched. It is hoped, nevertheless, that he will not stray too far from the elements required by the consultants.

### THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE PROPERTY

The residence at 1620 Cowper Street sits on a part of Block 24 laid out beginning in 1898 by the developers of the Seale Addition subdivision. The property is a part of lots 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 of that block as shown on "Map No. 2 of the Seale Addition in the Town of Palo Alto . . . on May, 1905, in Book of Maps, page(s) 75" (see legal description attached hereto as Appendix A).

Title insurance records establish that Alfred Seale's partner in the Seale Addition project, Gus Laumeister and his wife Mabel (and sister of Alfred Seale), were the first owners of the property described. They became owners in 1909 and may have acquired the remainder of the lots at the same time. In

any event, in 1916 the Laumeisters sold lots 5 and 6 to the Robert Hadleys, and lots 1, 2, and 3 at about the same time to Mr. and Mrs. P. J. S. Montgomery.

Frederick R. Wheeler acquired all of this property in Block 24 in 1921. It was Wheeler who built the residence at the southeast corner of Block 24, which became 465 Lowell Avenue (PAT 13/21). Thus the Wheelers were in possession of all of the lots bordering the east side of Cowper Street, except what is now 470 Coleridge at the corner of Coleridge and Cowper (see Plat map, Appendix B hereto).

Sometime in 1924 or 1925 the Wheelers sold the residence and the above-described property to M. L. Van Wyck. The Van Wycks retained all of this property until the portion which became 1620 Cowper was sold to Mr. Alf Wellhaven and his wife Emilie in 1931. A survey map prepared preliminary to that prospective sale shows not only the lot ultimately bought by the Wellhavens, but also a portion of the property adjacent and to the south owned by Van Wyck, contiguous with his residential property facing on Lowell Avenue. Also shown on the survey of the property to be bought by the Wellhavens was a "cottage and garage" on the southwest corner of the lot, as well as a "pool" in the center of the prospective Wellhaven lot. Later, the actual lot purchased by them underwent a "jog" at the southwest corner to leave the "cottage and garage" remaining under Van Wyck ownership. It thus appears that Van Wyck was using all of this property north of his residence either for rental or otherwise. It was not until 1948 that this area just south of the Wellhaven property was developed for a single family residence and became 1630 Cowper Street. The street number was changed to 1640 when later owners built a garage and an apartment over it even later. That structure was where the original Van Wyck "cottage and garage" was, ~~it~~ then became 1630 Cowper.

### THE ARCHITECT OF THE 1620 COWPER RESIDENCE

Charles Sumner, chosen by the Wellhavens as the architect to design their home, was one of the most prominent Palo Alto architects of the period. Indeed, in the 1920s and early 1930s, he and Birge Clark appear to have been in competition in designing homes in the Seale Addition, particularly in the Coleridge Avenue area. Charles Sumner, who was a native of Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, received his architecture degree from Columbia University and came to Palo Alto in 1916 where he maintained an office at 760 University Avenue.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to his work designing residences, he was also the architect for the Palo Alto Walter Hays Elementary School and the Los Altos Golf and Country Clubhouse in this area, as well as structures elsewhere such as the Yosemite Park Forest Rangers Clubhouse. He served on the Palo Alto Planning Commission and was an early and vigorous supporter of the University Avenue underpass. He died May 26, 1949 in Palo Alto.

### THE BUILDER OF 1620 COWPER

William Short of San Francisco was chosen as the builder. He died January 31, 1956. No biography of his life could be found, nor was any information discovered about his building activities.

### THE ORIGINAL OWNERS OF THE HOUSE AT 1620 COWPER STREET

It was for a Mr. and Mrs. (Alf and Emilie) Wellhaven that Charles Sumner designed their home in 1931. Despite this researcher's efforts, little could be discovered about the Wellhavens. We know that they had a daughter, Karen, who lived with them in 1932 when she was listed in the City Directory as a "student"—the guess is at Stanford.

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<sup>1</sup> His son, Bobby, was a close friend of my wife, Harriet, as they were growing up.



What is most mysterious, however, is that the Wellhaven family lived in their new home—which was so beautifully and carefully designed and built—for, at most, *only two years!* The cause for that sudden departure and what happened to the Wellhavens remains a mystery to this researcher. We know only that they left Palo Alto, but did not sell their home. It was rented to various tenants, as the City Directory reveals, for the next *10 years!* In one of those years—1941—the house was listed in the Directory as “vacant.”

In 1944, the house was bought by Mr. and Mrs. Sigvald Nielson. There was no change in ownership or its occupants until June of 1979 when Mrs. Nielson, then widowed, sold to the present owners, the Roland C. and Harriet A. Davis Trust.

#### A PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE HOUSE AT 1620 COWPER STREET

Charles Sumner's plans (copies of which are retained) were approved June 17, 1931 (PAT). Construction was completed in early 1932.

#### THE EXTERIOR

The style is English Tudor. The exterior walls are smooth beige-colored stucco on wood stud frame. The roof is gable in style and the material is cedar shingles. The foundation is perimeter concrete with vents. The two-car garage is incorporated and of the same style and construction. The original design provided for one fireplace with a brick chimney. In an alteration in 1962 by the Nielsons, to be discussed, a Swedish fireplace with a cast iron chimney was added back-to-back with the original fireplace. This chimney was stuccoed above the roof. (There remains on the roof above the kitchen a double piped and stuccoed fireplace originally designed for a wood stove.)

The front stoop is brick with wrought iron hand rails. The front door is wood paneled and the material is Honduran mahogany, matching the

material and of similar design as the interior lower floor walls, to be discussed. The door has a "peek through" small glass casement window which opens. A wrought iron grill protects the window from the outside.

There are six-foot high hedges fronting the sidewalk with two of similar height pillars on each side of a brick walk leading to the front door. There are smaller box hedges along the brick walk. The driveway is also bordered by a six-foot hedge matching one of the hedges on the other side of the driveway that also serves as border for the brick walk. A lower box hedge also borders a driveway planting area (see photos in the file).

The only other structure on the property is a glass and wood greenhouse built at the time the house was built and located at the ~~South~~<sup>North</sup> west corner of the property. (See rough drawing from Sanborn map attached as Appendix E.)

#### EXTERIOR ALTERATION AT THE REAR OF THE HOUSE

In the original design there was a tile or brick patio just to the rear, and apparently level with, the living room floor. Two glass doors, one from the living room and one from the dining room, opened onto the patio and a window from the living room looked out as well. There are also original double casement glass doors opening from the dining room onto the original patio (now what the Nielson's called their "lanai.") A narrow hall also leads from the main hallway to what was the original patio.

In 1962 the Nielsons decided to enclose the area with glass walls and a peaked shingle roof. (See photo in the file.) They added a wet bar at the walled end and the fireplace already described. (See also Appendices D and E.) The architect for this alteration was James Mann of San Francisco, and the local builder was Russell E. Atwater. The plans are retained.

## LANDSCAPING

There are five full grown oak trees on the property clearly of an age indicating their presence in the original Seale Addition before the area was developed. Three of those oaks are at the front of the property, visible from the street. (See photo in the file.) The other two are along the north side of the property. There is a younger oak of approximately 25 feet in height on the property's parkway which may have been planted while the Nielsons were the owners.

Hedges of similar size to those in front border the lawn in back, and more box hedges surround the back planting areas. (See photo in the file.) Other trees such as maple, holly, and magnolia ("tulip tree" variety) are part of the landscaping. Rhododendron and camellias grow above the gutter line along the front wall of the house. There is a rose garden at the rear of the property and an adjacent potting bench built into the outside of the greenhouse.

## THE INTERIOR

The house has four bedrooms and 3.5 baths. There is a walk-in attic with an entrance from the master bedroom. There is a basement with a wine cellar, a water heater and two furnaces, the second having been added by the Nielsons to heat the "lanai."

There is a large entry hall. At the right of the hall as you enter is the staircase with a banister of the Sumner-designed wrought iron pattern. The formal dining room is directly behind the hall and can be closed off with <sup>paneled mahogany</sup> double doors. The living room is to the left of the hall and beyond is the library with glass-paneled double doors leading to the garden.



The wall above the stairs, the hall, the dining room and its double doors from the main hall, the walls at each end of the living room and the bookshelves and walls of the library are all of Honduran mahogany. In addition, the fireplace is enclosed at the sides and above with the same mahogany. A bookcase across the room is of the same material. Above the staircase facing the hallway is a full-length <sup>Cathedral</sup> casement window.

\* \* \*

I shall end this report with a personal note: Lest there be any misconstruction of what may have been a sometimes glowing description of this house and its landscape, let it be known *this property is not for sale!*

**SOURCES**

Palo Alto Planning Department: Sanborn Maps; Bods: PAT Records.

Guy Miller Archives: Residential Card Index; Architects and Builders File;  
Biography File; Obituary File; Historic Inventory File of 1620 Cowper.

Main Library City Directories: 1919-1979.

Owners' Files: Title Insurance Policy; Plat Map; Architect's Plans; 1931 Survey  
of Property; Personal Observations.



## LEGAL DESCRIPTION

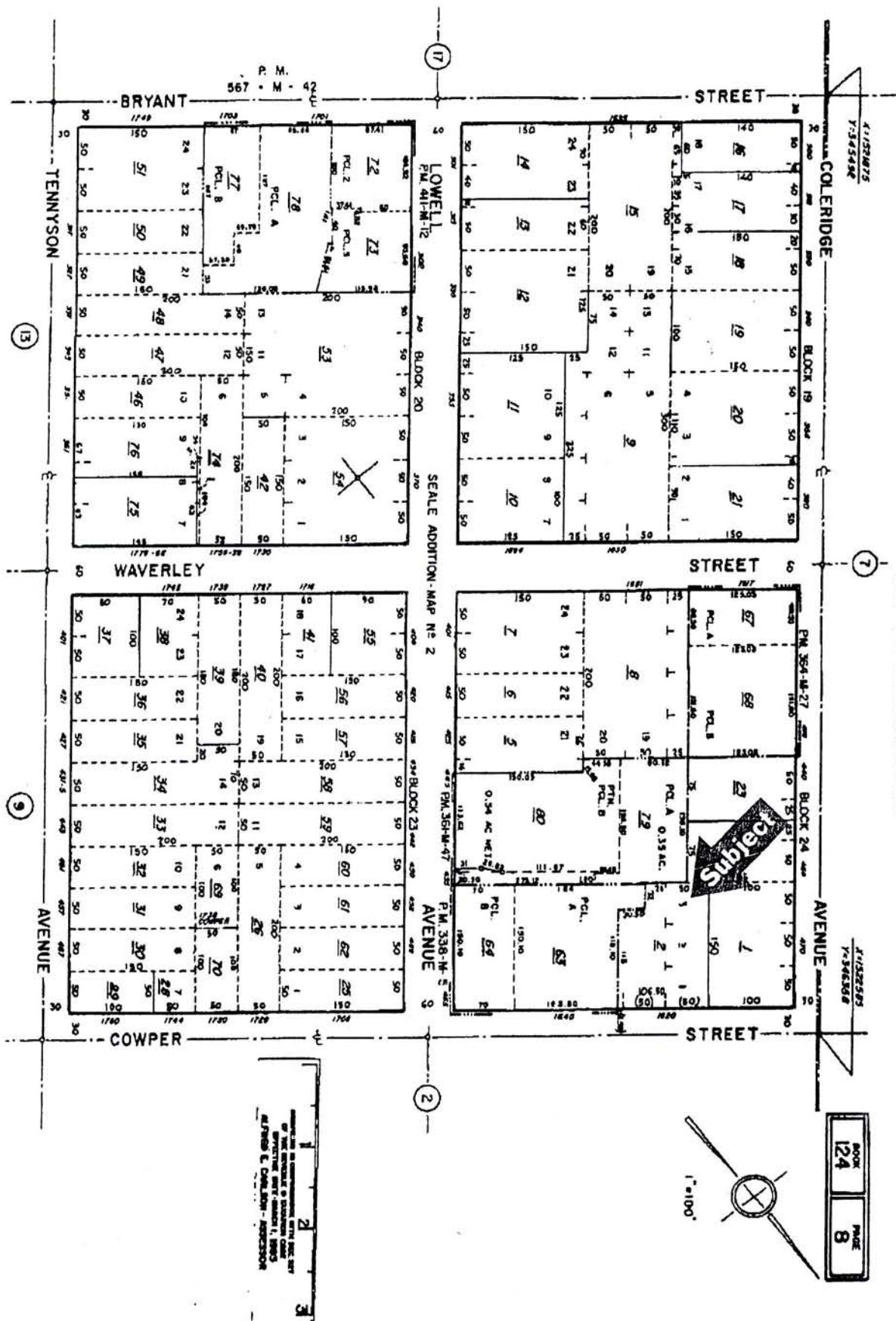
REAL PROPERTY In the City of Palo Alto, County of Santa Clara, State of California, described as follows:

Portion of Lots 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6, in Block 24, as shown on that certain Map entitled "Map No. 2 of the Seale Addition to the Town of Palo Alto", which Map was filed for record in the office of the Recorder of the County of Santa Clara, State of California on May 15, 1905, in Book K of Maps page(s) 75.

Beginning at a point on the Southwesterly line of Cowper Street, distant thereon 100 feet Southeasterly from the point of intersection of the Southeasterly line of Coleridge Avenue with said line of Cowper Street; thence on and along said Southwesterly line of Cowper Street, Southeasterly 106.50 feet; thence leaving said line of Cowper Street, Southwesterly at right angles 118 feet; thence at right angles Northwesterly 30.50 feet; thence at right angles Southwesterly 32 feet; thence at right angles Northwesterly 76 feet; thence at right angles Northeasterly 150 feet to the Southwesterly line of Cowper Street and the point of beginning.

APN: 124-08-002

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ELEC. CONTR. OWNER

HTG. CONTR. *E & D*

PLBG. CONTR. *S & E*

SDWK. CONTR.

No. A 22144

**Sigvald Nielson**

**1620 Comper Street**

PHONE

ENGINEER

**James Mann**

**Box 868, San Francisco VA 6-1860**

PHONE

ARCHITECT

DESIGNER

BUILDER

**Russel E. Atwater**

**4252 Mampela Ct.**

**948-9224**

DATE **9/17/62**

ESTIMATED COST

\$ **10,000.00**

DATE COMPLETED **12-7-62**

NEW  REPAIR  ADDON'L.  ALT'N.

USE PERMIT

VARIANCE

FEE

\$ **33.00**

LOCATION

STREET **COMPER STREET**

NO. **1620**

LOT **pts 1-2-3-5**

BLOCK **24**

SUBDIVISION **S. Palo Alto**

LOT:

SIZE OF LOT **106.6 x 150**  
**area 15975**

USE ZONE **R1**  
**R10**

SETBACK **2000**

SIDE LINE

REAR LINE

NEAREST BLDG.

LOT RESUBDN.

DESIGN CONTROL O.K.

DESCRIPTION OF BUILDING

WIDTH **30'2"**

DEPTH **29'2"**

HEIGHT **10'**

STORIES

FIRE ZONE **3**

TYPE OF CONSTRUCTION **V**

AREA OCCUPIED SO. FT. **2641**

% OF LOT WIDTH COVERED

NEW LIVING UNITS

OCCUPANCY GROUP **I/J**

HOW HEATED

TO BE USED AS

**lanai**

OFF STREET PARKING

**SJH:sm**

NOTES

**lanai at rear of existing residence**

	FORMS	JOISTS	SLAB	GIRDERS	FRAME	ROUGH	PLUMBING VENTS	FINAL	WATER	RAD. HEAT	ROUGH	GAS	FINAL	SEWER
DATE:	<i>10-1</i>				<i>11-15</i>	<i>11-15</i>								
INSP.	<i>CS</i>				<i>SQ</i>	<i>SQ</i>								
	ELECTRICAL	FIREPLACE	FURNACE	FLUES	INT. LATH	EXT. LATH	CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION AUTHORIZED				J. STEWART BOTTEMA Building Inspector			
DATE:			<i>11-15</i>	<i>11-15</i>			JAN 7 1962				BY <i>[Signature]</i>			
INSP.			<i>SQ</i>	<i>SQ</i>							CITY OF PALO ALTO BUILDING RECORD			
SUB PERMITS	b <i>18373</i> (Plg.)	c	(Elec.)	c	(Cont.)	d	(Gas)	d <i>18580</i>	(Fluc)					
	c				(Fixt.)	d <i>18580</i>	(Furnace)							

QUADRUPLICATE - BUILDING RECORD

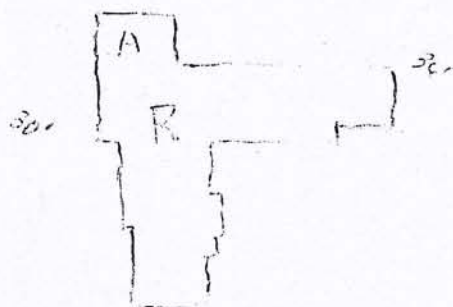


1932

712

OCCUPANCY	CONSTRUCTION	SIZE	GRADE	AGE	REMOD'D	COND.	PHY. DEP.	FUNC. DEP.	REP. VALUE	PHYSICAL VALUE	ACTUAL VALUE		
Dwng	2 1/2 story		AHS	1932		G	20	15	17,983	14,386	12,228		
LANAI	1-STY		AHS	1962					4,719		4,929		
Green House	- Glass	8x10		1932		F	30		192	134	134		
FOUNDATION									TOTAL				
Concrete Walls	Attic Fl. & Stairs										17,291		
Cement Block Walls	Fin. Attic Area										BUILDING COMPUTATION		
Brick Walls	Fin. Basement										1500 S.F.	2.08	10,134
Mud Sills	Recreation Rm. Bsmnt.										747 S.F.	3.44	2,544
Plat	Garage in Bsmnt.										15 S.F.	4.00	60
BASMENT AREA 12x15		Room	1	2	A	289 S.F.		2.06	593				
4	%	Living Room	1			S.F.							
EXTERIOR WALLS		Dining Room	1			S.F.							
Adobe	Breakfast Room	1			S.F.								
Siding on Sheathing	Den	1			S.F.								
Single Siding	Bedroom	1	3		S.F.								
Wood Shingles	Bath	1	2		S.F.								
Stucco on Frame	Kitchen	1			S.F.								
Stucco on Tile or C. B.	Storage	1			S.F.								
Face Brick Veneer	Rampas	1			S.F.								
Face Br. on Tile or C. B.	Service Porch	1			S.F.								
Com. Brick Veneer	INTERIOR FINISH												
Com. Br. on Tile or C. B.	Stucco Veneer		1						BASE PRICE 6.75				
Solid Com. Brick	Solid Stone								Bsmnt. Area 263				
Stucco Veneer	Roof Insulation								Walls				
Solid Stone	Wall Insulation								Roof				
ROOF TYPE		Hardwood								Floors			
Hip	Gable	Enameled								Floors			
Mansard	Flat	Plywood								Attic			
Gambrel	Wallboard										Bsmnt. Finish		
ROOFING		Unfinished Interior								Int. Finish			
Asphalt Shingle	Interior Cond.										Heating Sys. .33		
Wood Shingle	Layout										Auto. Htg. U.		
Asbestos Shingle	HEATING		LIGHTING		TILING		OUTBUILDINGS				Fireplaces 300		
Slate	Floor Furnace		No Electric Lighting		Bath Floor & Wainscot 2		Wall Foundation		BY		Plumbing 600		
Shakes	Wall Furnace		Gas Lighting		Bath Floor & Walls 1		Pier Foundation		5		Tiling 600		
Tile	Radiant		PLUMBING		Bath Floor Only		Single Wall Sdg.		LISTED BY				
Metal	Hot Air		Bath Rooms 3		Toilet Rm. Fl. & Wains.		Double Wall Sdg.		5				
Composition	Pipeless		St. Shower Bath Room		Toilet Rm. Fl. & Walls		Shingle Walls		AREA				
Tar & Gravel	Air Conditioning		Stall Shower Extra		Toilet Rm. Fl. Only		Stucco On		COMP. BY				
FLOORS		Hot Water		Toilet Rooms		Kitchen Wainscot		Cement Block		PRICED BY			
Cement	Steam		Water Closet Extra		Kitchen Floor		Concrete Floor						
Earth	No Heating System		Lavatory Extra		LOCATION		Earth Floor						
Pls	Gas		Sink Extra		Good		Shingle Roof						
Hardwood	Oil Burner		Septic Tank or Cesspool		Fair		Concrete Floor						
Single Fl.	FIREPLACES		Water Only		Poor		Earth Floor						
Asph. Tile	Fireplace Stacks 2		No Plumbing				Shingle Roof						
Rein. Conc.	Fireplaces				INCOME		Roll Roofing						
									Tile				
									Electric Lights				
									TOTAL		15,637		
									COST FACTOR +15				
									REPLACEMENT VALUE		17,983		

1620 Cowper



R ← earlier structure

1934 Sanborn

New Index May 45

New Rept. Apr. 62