

Physical History

1848 - 1877

From the late eighteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth century the area now occupied by the Sutro District was part of Rancho Punta de Lobos, a large Mexican land grant. Following the formal acquisition of California by the United States in 1848, these lands became part of the City and County of San Francisco. Comprising the westernmost tip of San Francisco, the area around Point Lobos was considered remote and inaccessible for most of the nineteenth century and came to be known as the Outside Lands.

By 1854, Point Lobos Bluff had been homesteaded by a potato farmer named Chambers, but remained relatively undeveloped (see photo, History #1). Hikers and horseback riders reached this portion of the Pacific coast on one of several trails crossing the six miles of sand dunes that lay between downtown San Francisco and the sea. By the middle 1850s, travelers could rest and take refreshment at Seal Rock House located at the foot of the cliff near Seal Rock, or at Ocean House four miles to the south on the western end of the Mission Dolores trail to the beach.

With the rapid influx of people and money associated with the California Gold Rush, San Francisco developed quickly during the 1850s. Between 1850 and 1860, the local population nearly doubled, growing from 35,000 to 56,000. More significantly, the entire city changed abruptly from a ragged frontier town with unpaved streets and crudely constructed wooden buildings into a modern, well-organized, and almost elegant city.

In the late 1850s, Charles C. Butler, a well-known San Francisco real estate magnate, purchased 160 acres around Point Lobos. Although Butler had planned originally to hold the land until profitable to sell, he soon decided to develop the site as a fashionable resort. In 1862, Butler joined forces with Senator James Buckley and James Phelan to form the Point Lobos Road Company. In February 1863, work began on a road that would lead from Point Lobos cliff to the site of the proposed new resort, and then to the beach below. Point Lobos Avenue, completed in several months at a cost of \$175,000, provided a direct route from the end of Bush Street (at today's Presidio Avenue) past the site of the Cliff House to Ocean Beach.

When completed, the Point Lobos Road was 110 feet wide, mostly paved in macadam. One side of the road was developed as a mile-and-a-half long clay speedway for fast-trotting horses with rolled and watered clay paving. By 1863, a horse-drawn stage-coach made the trip from Portsmouth Square to the Point Lobos area each Sunday.

Simultaneous with the development of Point Lobos Road, Butler and Buckley oversaw the construction of the first Cliff House. The first Cliff House was a relatively simple, one-story, frame and clapboard structure (see photo, History #2). Early photographs show only a paved pull-in and sidewalk between the front façade of the building and Point Lobos Road. Butler placed Captain Julius Foster in charge of the operation of the Cliff House. Butler's plan for the Cliff House was to develop a fashionable resort for affluent San Franciscans. Owing to his success, Butler had the Cliff House enlarged to three times its original size with additions to both the north and south ends. Other alterations included a platform added to the roadside of the Cliff House to shelter visitors from the wind and a broad, seaside verandah that could be used as an outdoor dance floor.

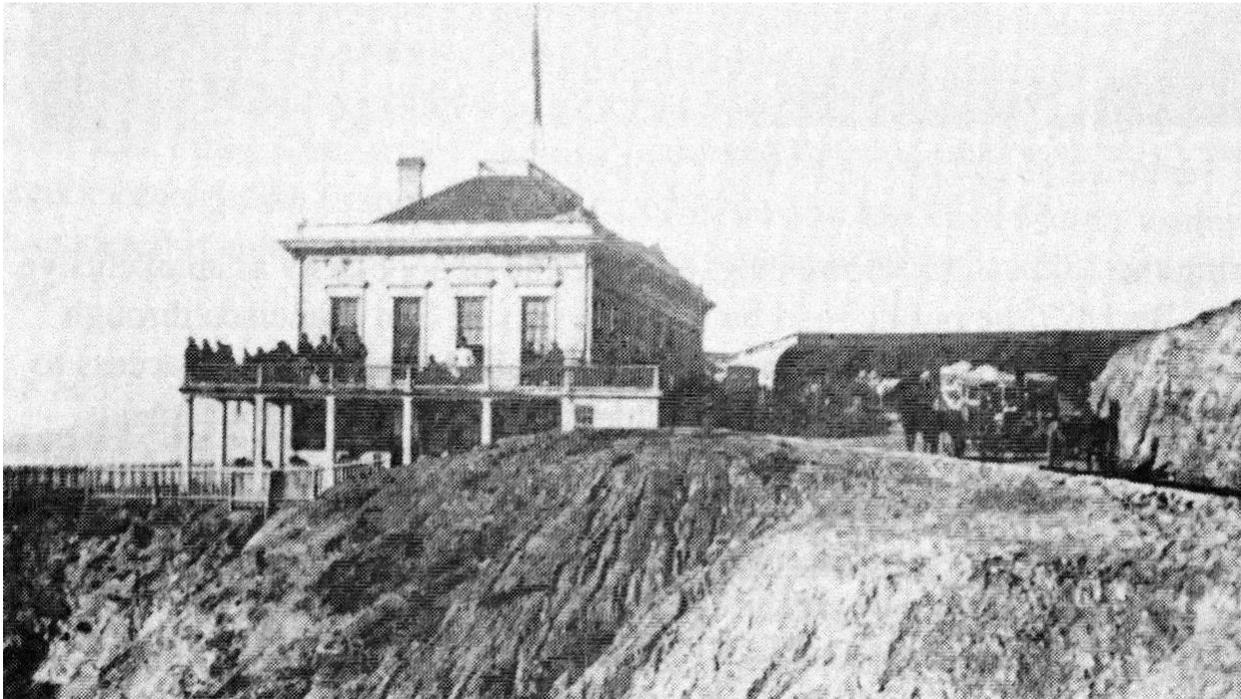
In 1868, the City of San Francisco acquired the future site of Golden Gate Park, a one-half mile wide

tract of land that fronted on the ocean and extended three miles inland, in response to the lack of open public space. The development of recreational facilities for the public had been ignored during the late nineteenth century even though there was a great influx of money into the city due to gold and silver mining. Instead, wealth was displayed in the construction of grand mansions and luxurious hotels and restaurants. In 1871, under the auspices of William H. Hall, work began on the development of the 1,017 acre park. By the end of the decade, the park featured two miles of roads and paths, more than 135,000 trees and shrubs, and a greenhouse and nursery.

During the 1870s, Cliff House began to decline in popularity as an exclusive resort. By 1877, the public road built by the City of San Francisco through Golden Gate Park to the beach was providing access to all classes of people to the Cliff House vicinity. Increased competition from new establishments developing along the shore influenced Butler to lure new patrons by offering gambling, alcohol, and late hours. By the late 1870s, the Cliff House was attracting a less fashionable clientele.



History #1: Site of Sutro Baths before construction. (CLR, 1993)



History #2: The first Cliff House and surroundings. (CLR, 1993)

1881 - 1887

When Adolph Sutro moved to San Francisco in the late 1870s, he purchased real estate in the city, much of which was still undeveloped. His efforts were focused largely on purchasing the Outside Lands. In March 1881, he purchased the future site of his Sutro Heights home while visiting the home of Samuel Tetlow. Tetlow's small frame cottage was located on a promontory overlooking the Cliff House and Seal Rocks with views of the Pacific Ocean, Mount Tamalpais, and the Golden Gate. Sutro was supposedly so entranced by the site that he made a deposit of \$1,000 (on a total sale price of \$15,000) for the cottage and an adjoining 1.65 acres that afternoon. Sutro also purchased the 21.21 acres adjacent to the cottage as well as eighty acres of shore lands bordering Fort Miley and part of the future Lincoln Park, which included the Cliff House.

At the time that Sutro first visited his new residence, Tetlow apparently had enlarged the cottage and started a small garden. Four tiers of picket fences, intended to prevent erosion, stood between the cottage and the steep hillside overlooking the Point Lobos Road.

Sutro retained the relatively modest appearance of the cottage during renovation. Instead, Sutro concentrated on the immediate development of elaborate gardens that would eventually cover the twenty-acre site. Much of the early site work consisted of creating an environment conducive to the growth of tender garden plants and included the construction of tall, wooden, slat fences on the north and west exposures and the planting of eucalyptus, cypress, and pine tree wind breaks. Sutro's plans depended on extensive site grading to create the numerous terraces that later developed into individual garden rooms defined by paths, plantings, and gentle slopes (see photo, History #3). Dating from the site's development, there was also the establishment of "The Old Grove," a grouping of eucalyptus, cypress, and pine trees planted approximately ten to fifteen feet on center and located in front of the Sutro

residence. There were also eight axial walkways that radiated from a central point, giving the grove a formal appearance, and establishing it as a central organizing element.

Prior to Sutro's acquisition of the site, the main entrance to Sutro Heights was located on lower Point Lobos Avenue (currently at the junction of Serpentine Drive and Ivy Lane), from which point a road climbed up the site's steep north slope. Around 1883, a new main entrance to the site was developed at Palm Avenue on the corner of 48th Street and Point Lobos Avenue; the original entrance on lower Point Lobos Avenue came to be used as the service or private entrance. The development of the Palm Avenue entrance as the primary entrance to the site responded to the 1883 placement of a major depot (the Ocean Terrace stop) of the Park and Ocean Railroad directly across the street. The low fares offered by the railroad resulted in increased visitation by San Franciscans who frequently made Sutro Heights the first stop on their trips to the Point Lobos shore.

By 1883, prominent gates marked both the main and private entrances. The main gate was a highly decorative wood structure more than twenty-five feet tall and flanked by two statues of reclining lions. This truss-like structure consisted of a central carriage entrance arch and half arches on each side for pedestrian passage, supported by decorative wood columns. The carriage entrance was secured by side-hinged double gates and the two pedestrian entrances had similar single gates. The gate at the private or service entrance on lower Point Lobos Avenue has been described as a smaller wooden structure flanked by statues of animals. In addition to the two Point Lobos Avenue entrances, secondary entrances were located along the east and southeast edges of the site, and each was marked by a minor gate.

Three main roadways were created at Sutro Heights as part of the initial development of the property: Palm Avenue, the Esplanade, and Serpentine Drive. Palm Avenue was the most formal, lined with palm-like *Dracena draco* trees, edged with a carefully trimmed lawn and linear flower beds, and terminating with a carriage turnaround marked by planters, statues, and a fountain. Graded and graveled with crushed local sandstone, the main roads on the site were intended for pedestrians, and limited carriage and horseback use. Wherever necessary for proper drainage, roads on the site were lined with concrete swale gutters, approximately one foot wide. In 1891, a system of brick-lined catch-basins connected with terra-cotta drain pipes was installed on the Esplanade, to prevent the erosion of the cliff below. The entire length of the Esplanade was lined with an ornamental wooden post and chain fence to define the overlook, and keep visitors away from the cliffs below.

Along with the main roads, narrower secondary paths, also paved with crushed stone, passed through the gardens and were limited to pedestrian use. These secondary paths led the visitor through the gardens in a meandering, leisurely style, and featured lookouts, seating areas, and garden structures.

Sutro created a thick forest of trees interspersed by small formal and semi-formal flower beds and planting displays. The outdoor rooms created within the forest, linked by a series of paths within the tree canopy, provided the light and shelter necessary for successful plant cultivation. The terraced garden rooms were designed to feature specific plants, a piece of sculpture, or a scenic view. All featured an open central lawn framed by decorative plantings and surrounded either by forest or open to the west with a view of the ocean. Several of these areas had descriptive names such as the Rosarium, the Oval, and the Adonis.

Along with the garden rooms, Sutro incorporated several other planting features. A hedge maze was located in the northeast corner of the grounds. Carpet beds or parterres were another prominent planting feature. The greatest concentration of planting displays was arranged along Palm Avenue in front of the carriage turnaround. Intricate parterres were located to the west of Palm Avenue opposite the conservatory. Popular in England and America during the Victorian era, these beds consisted of finely

trimmed displays of annual or seasonal flowers arranged in various shapes and patterns. Historic photographs of Sutro Heights taken during this period show an American flag, with the date "1889" and the other bearing the name "Sutro Heights." Known to have been in place by 1885, these flower beds required extensive maintenance by skilled gardeners and horticulturalists.

The Gnomes Arbor Vitae, another striking garden feature at Sutro Heights, was a sculpted hedge of American Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*) in front of the conservatory. The hedge consisted of a straight segment approximately 130 feet long with two sixty foot lateral rows of arborvitae radiating from its center at sixty degree angles and creating three wedge-shaped planting areas with a Norfolk Island pine centered in each. At maturity, the hedge reached a height of twenty feet, and despite the extensive pruning it required, appears to have been well-maintained into the 1920s.

Sutro used largely drought-tolerant plant materials, many of which were native to similar climates in the Mediterranean, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. Species were selected for quick growth and tolerance to seaside conditions. Constant changes of the plant materials used in the beds and annual borders as Sutro experimented with new species and patterns kept a large staff of gardeners employed. The major forest trees planted on the site included Monterey cypress and pine, maritime pine, and eucalyptus. Dracena palms and Norfolk Island pines were used as specimens and accents. Shrubs included hydrangeas, roses, rhododendrons, hebe, and coprosma with phormiums as accents. Hedges were of yew and arborvitae. Annuals and perennials used in beds and borders consisted of geraniums, salvias, chrysanthemums, and violas. Agaves grew in planters and beds. The formal carpet beds, or parterres, included a variety of succulents, trimmed herbs, boxwood, and miniatures.

A spring located below on the future site of the Sutro Baths supplied water for the gardens. Windmills pumped the water to a 50,000 gallon storage tank located on 48th Avenue at A Street and to another 15,000 gallon tank located atop the parapet. The water was then gravity-fed from these two high points to the various portions of the garden. Portable sprinklers aided in garden irrigation.

Numerous statues, planters, and fountains were located on the grounds at Sutro Heights. During his 1883 tour of Europe, Sutro arranged for the casting of more than 200 pieces of sculpture in Belgium, which were shipped from Antwerp to San Francisco in 1884. The sculptures, along with rustic benches, chairs, and tables, were displayed on the grounds at Sutro Heights. Sutro's intent was for the statuary to provide accessible examples of European culture to the visitors in the park. In addition, planting urns flanked sculptures, such as "Venus de Milo" and the fountain located in the center of the carriage turnaround, as well as provided borders for the terraced lawn near the conservatory (see photo, History #4). Other planting urns served as carpet bed focal points.

One of the first major structures built following the remodeling of the residence was the rock and sandstone parapet located immediately west of the residence (see photo, History #5). Sited on the highest point of the estate, the parapet continues to provide breathtaking views of the surrounding coastal scenery. Since its completion in 1895, the parapet has been a major focal point, observation platform, and Sutro Heights visitor destination.

As built, the parapet was a curved sandstone wall that extended in a semicircle for 280 feet. Two 100-foot walls projected from the north and south ends, creating a partial "D" shape. A small storage cellar with an arched doorway, possibly used as a wine cellar, was located on the north wall. Between the two rear walls a sloping ramp provided access to the top viewing platform. On the western side of the parapet there was a narrow stone staircase connected to the Esplanade. The parapet floor was covered with crushed native sandstone. Thirty stone crenellations, each topped with either a concrete statue or planting urn and linked together with iron pipe railings, defined the top edge of the parapet. Initially,

freestanding chairs, and two large, parrott model cannons pointing to the sea (each with a stack of cannon balls) were located on the parapet.

Around 1890, the southwest exposure was terraced with several low rock retaining walls to reinforce the structure and prevent further soil erosion. The resulting exposed site was developed as a rock garden and planted with a variety of drought and stress tolerant plants including agave, aloe, ice plant, and other succulents.

Another significant landscape structure at Sutro Heights was the “Dolce far Niente” Balcony, a long terrace-like structure constructed in 1884-1885 on the cliff face below the South Esplanade and overlooking Ocean Beach (see photo, History #6). This elegant structure consisted of a cantilevered wood deck protruding from the cliff face and supported by wooden posts. The posts extended upward through the deck, terminating in a series of open wooden arches framing the ocean view to the west. A continuous decorative railing linked the posts at the deck level, and the open area below the deck was screened with lathes to give the structure a finished appearance from the beach below. Two stairways descending from the Esplanade provided access to the 250-foot-long balcony.

The gallery, built around 1884 at the northeast end of the parapet, was a one-story wood building featuring shingle siding and a sharply pitched shingled roof. A Queen Anne-style tower joined the gallery to the adjacent parapet; the tower actually resting atop one of the crenellations. Until well into the 1920s, the gallery operated as a photograph and souvenir concession; visitors could have their picture taken with the panoramic view of the parapet in the background, rent special glasses with which to view Seal Rock, and purchase postcards and other gifts.

The well house, built around 1885, is the last surviving building from the Sutro era remaining at Sutro Heights. Built on an elevated foundation of cut and dressed sandstone, this small wood frame structure originally featured carved wooden posts, iron grillwork doors on the north and south façades, decorative shingles, and finials capping each roof end. Sited at the top of Serpentine Drive, the well house marked the entrance from the lower gate to the central garden area. Although it is not clear whether the structure ever actually housed a well, it did contain the plumbing for the pair of drinking fountains mounted on opposite sides of the structure. The fountains featured scallop shell basins.

The tank house and observation tower located at the southeast corner of the parapet, adjacent to the residence, was built around 1884. This two-story building with white clapboard siding was built by Sutro to house and screen the twin 15,000 gallon water tanks located on the rear of the parapet. However, an 1886 photograph showing the building labeled as "observatory" indicates the structure's alternate use as a viewing station that provided visitors with an elevated view of the surrounding panorama. Subsequently a taller, three-story, wood observation tower of a similar design was constructed adjacent to the tank house to the north. This structure, which featured a cantilevered, glass-enclosed observatory on top, soon became a landmark recognizable from a great distance.

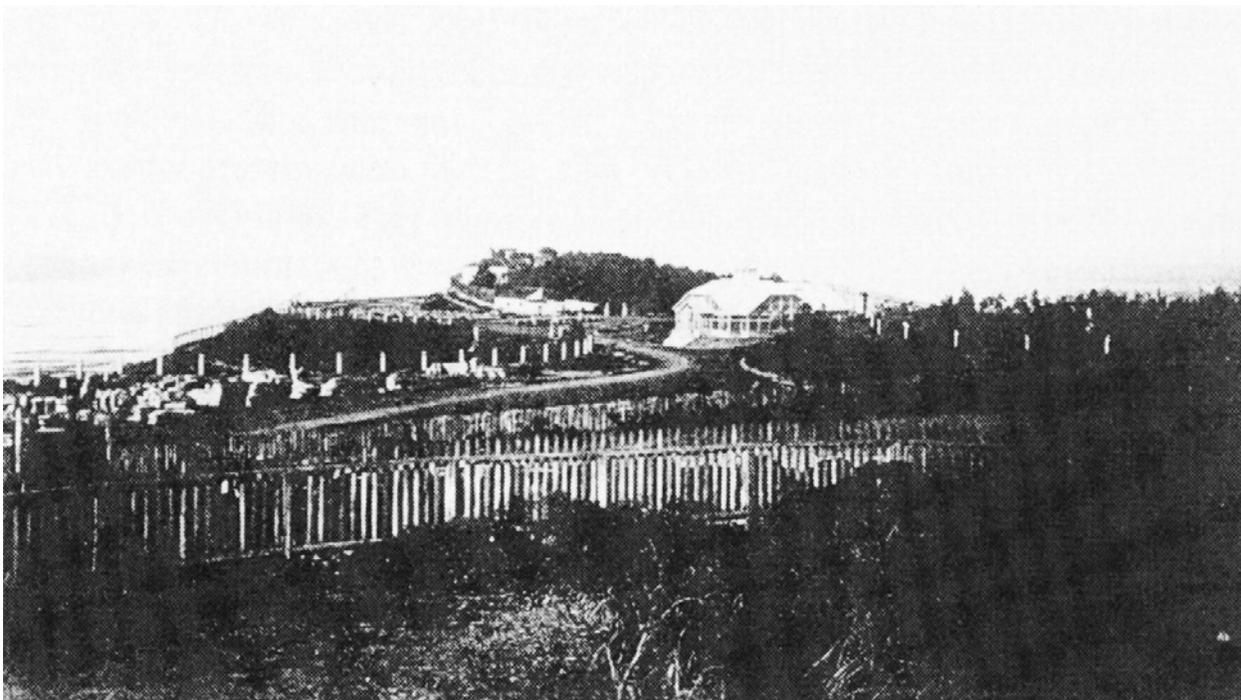
The conservatory was an elaborate greenhouse structure built to house Sutro's collection of climate-sensitive tropical plants. Centrally located on an elevated mound east of the terminus of Palm Avenue, the structure was cruciform in plan, with a central ventilation tower. Built entirely of small glass panels mounted in wood frames, this ornate garden structure was supported by internal wood framing. The interior, which held a lush variety of palms, ferns, tropical flowers, and statuary, provided visitors with an impressive botanical display.

Two gatekeeper's houses were built around 1885-1886, one at the main gate and one at the lower gate. Once Sutro Heights was open to the public a guestbook was kept at the main gate house. Both buildings

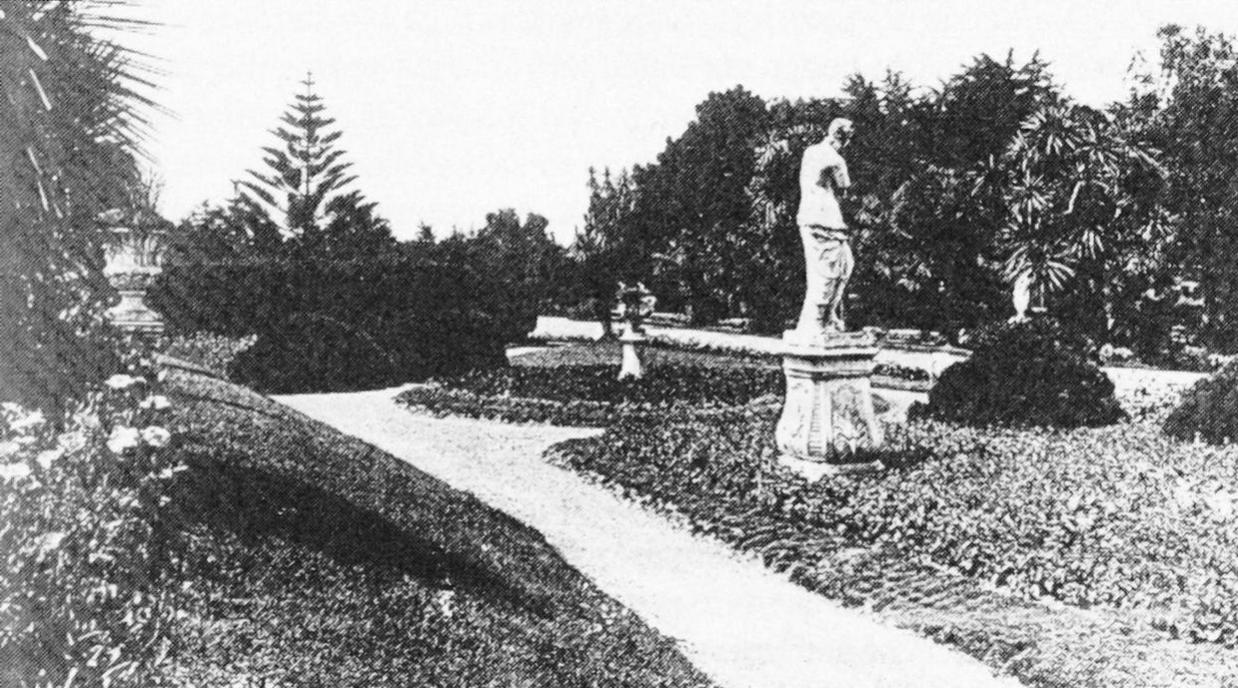
were octagonal, wood-frame structures clad in horizontal tongue in groove siding, with pointed roofs and metal weathervanes in the shape of roosters. It appears that these were movable buildings with no foundations. In addition, several sheds located on the access road to the residence were used to store gardening tools and provide shelter for small animals.

When Sutro Heights was opened to the public in 1885, Sutro wanted to make a trip there more affordable for everyone. He supported the development of a new steam rail line designed to bring people from downtown to the Cliff House for half the cost of a fare on the competing line. The route linked downtown with Land's End along the present route of California Street, and around Point Lobos, terminating at Sutro Heights (see photo, History #7). Sutro invested significantly in the project and paid for the grading and laying of track on the three-mile stretch where the line would pass through his own property between City Cemetery and the cliffs of Point Lobos.

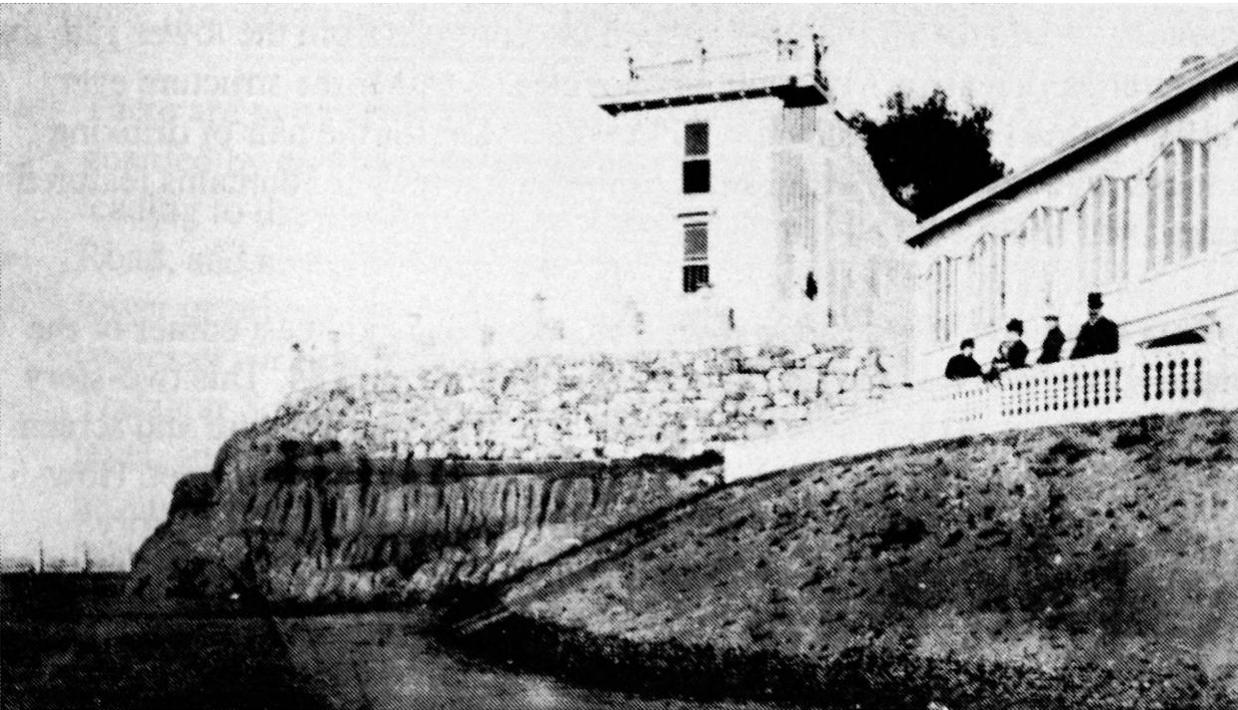
In 1887, the Sutros sold their franchise in the new rail line to the Powell Street Railroad Company. In 1888, the completed new rail line, the Cliff House and Ferries Railroad, provided widespread access to the Sutro Heights area.



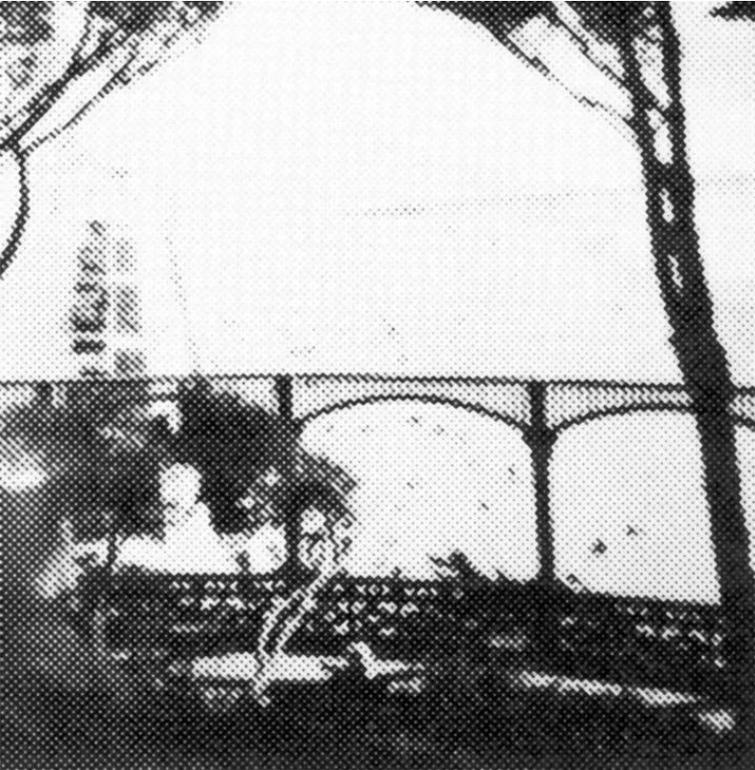
History #3: Sutro Heights from the reservoir, 1886. (CLR, 1993)



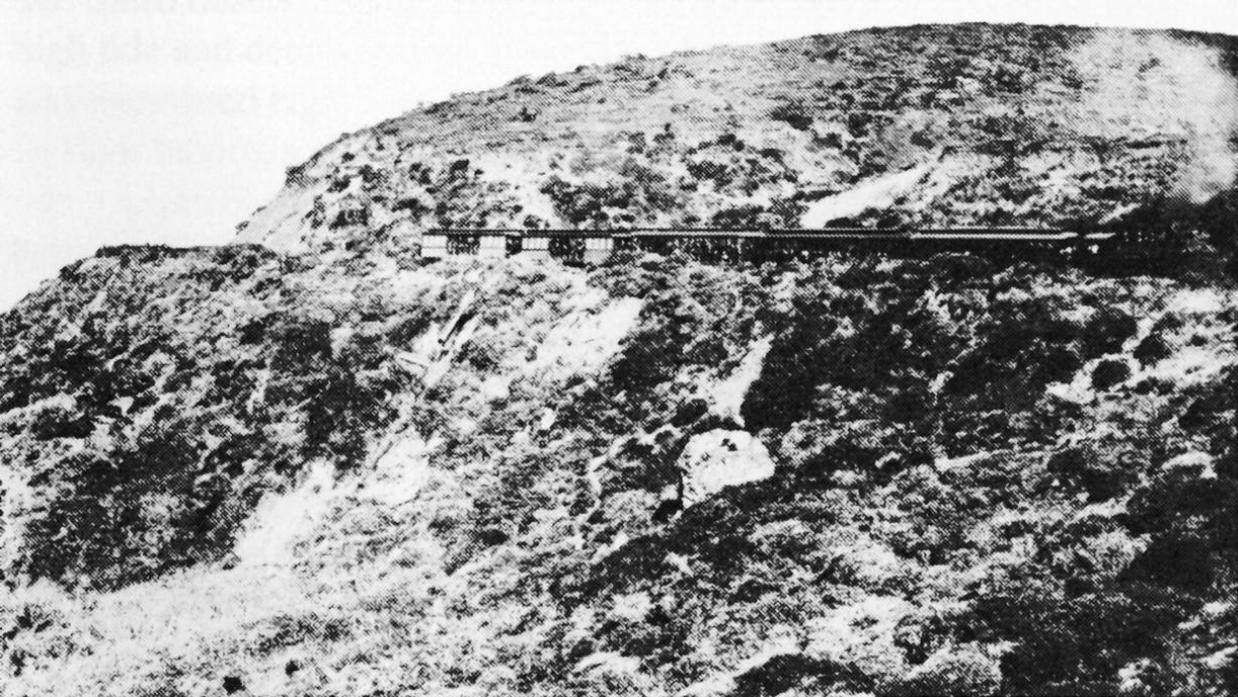
History #4: Sutro Heights garden statues. (CLR, 1993)



History #5: Parapet wall and statuary. (CLR, 1993)



History #6: Dolce far Niente Balcony. (CLR, 1993)



History #7: Cliff House and Ferries Railroad. (CLR, 1993)

1887 - 1898

When Adolph Sutro acquired the Cliff House in 1883, it had been suffering from poor management and neglect. Sutro's first step was to replace Junius Foster, who had managed the restaurant for twenty years, with James M. Wilkins. By 1887, the reputation of the Cliff House had improved as a family establishment. However, not much evidence remains of any physical improvements that have occurred during this period owing to the damage the Cliff House received when the schooner *Parallel*, which had a cargo of more than 1,500 cases of dynamite, exploded offshore in January 1887. The blast seriously damaged the Cliff House, leaving windows shattered and doors hanging off their hinges. Despite extensive damage there are no reports that the Cliff House ceased its operations as a result. The building was remodeled in 1889.

Sutro's interest in natural history and marine studies led to the development of an ocean pool, or aquarium, among the rocks north of Fisherman's Cove and the Cliff House (see photo, History #8). A semi-circular wall fifteen feet thick and fourteen feet wide was constructed adjacent to the ocean on the northwest corner of the cove to create a basin. A tunnel, eight feet high and 153 feet long cut through an adjacent cliff, allowed water to pore into the basin during high tide. A small door in the tunnel controlled the amount of water delivered into the basin and a subterranean outlet allowed water to circulate back to the ocean. As designed, small marine animals would pour into the basin with the high tide and, as the tide receded, become visible in the four feet of water remaining at low tide. A network of rock paths crossing the basin provided visitors with the opportunity for a closer look at the marine specimens uncovered during low tide. In addition, a heated glass-enclosed pool was sited on higher ground above the tidal basin and featured a stocked supply of more exotic sea creatures. The basin and tunnel were completed on September 3, 1887.

Sutro continued to expand the range of his ocean front complex with the development of a massive public bath house, or swimming facility. Between 1887 and 1889, Sutro attempted three times to erect a bulkhead from the aquarium to the rock under the Cliff House to provide a foundation for the proposed baths. The first two times the seawall was constructed it sank into the sand, resulting in the loss of more than \$70,000 worth of concrete. However, by the fall of 1889, the third attempt at building a wall was successful.

Work on the baths proceeded throughout the early 1890s. Sutro's records and correspondence during the early 1890s describe a flurry of activity relating to the baths project, including blasting for rock to line the fresh water pond, planting loam on the slopes, building a road from the cottage to the construction site, making gutterways and a cave, dumping clay over sandy slopes to check erosion, hauling sand from the cave and from Ocean Beach south of the Cliff House to make cement, and hauling lumber from the San Miguel property to the work site.

The main entrance to the baths from Point Lobos Avenue was a small structure built in the form of a small classical temple (see photo, History #9). From this entry one descended a broad stairway, lined with potted palms, to the museum gallery, which contained a series of glass exhibition cases filled with selections from Sutro's vast collection of artwork, archeological artifacts, and curios. From the gallery the visitor could proceed, either by elevator or down the grand staircase, to a massive enclosure containing the six saltwater swimming tanks of varying sizes, shapes, and water temperatures. The largest of the pools was L-shaped, with a length of 275 feet and a depth ranging from three and a half to nine feet. The other five saltwater pools all measured twenty-eight by seventy five feet, with pool depths ranging from two to six feet, each heated to different temperatures by live steam. Holding a total of 1,685,000 gallons of sea water, the construction of the pools required more than 10,000 barrels of concrete. Adjacent to the bath area, on three sides rose tier upon tier of bleacher-like seats, providing seating for thousands of spectators. Overhead, a massive arched glass roof made from 100,000 square feet of stained glass and supported by 600 tons of iron girders gave the baths a light and airy appearance,

and provided breath-taking scenery (see photo, History #10). Above the baths were three levels of alcoves, balconies and balustrades, a restaurant on each of the three floors, galleries, an amphitheater, and a promenade.

A variety of structures associated with the development of the gardens at Sutro Heights were constructed during the 1890s. One of the first major structures built following the remodeling of the Sutro residence was the rock and sandstone parapet located immediately west of the residence. Since its completion in 1895, the parapet has been a major focal point, observation platform, and Sutro Heights destination. Around 1890, the southwest exposure was terraced with several low rock retaining walls to reinforce the structure and prevent further soil erosion.

In 1893, the Market Street Railway Company, a subsidiary of the massive Southern Pacific railroad, purchased the Cliff House and Ferries Railway. The new owners increased the fare to ten cents once again, overriding Sutro's original stipulation that a five-cent fare must be maintained. Sutro offered to donate Sutro Heights to the City of San Francisco and to charge a nominal fee at the Sutro Baths if Market Street Railway would reinstate the five-cent fare. When Southern Pacific refused to cooperate, Sutro fenced his property and charged an entrance fee to anyone who had taken the railroad to the beach. In 1894, Sutro decided to build another railroad to the area in order to ensure a permanent reasonable fare to the beach. He obtained a franchise to build an electric line on Presidio Avenue running along Clement Street, one block south of the rival line on California Street. Sutro also began the development of a branch on Eighth Street, serving Golden Gate Park, and he arranged for free transfers at Presidio Avenue to the Sutter Street Line, which was also independent from the Southern Pacific's monopoly.

In 1894, less than five years after the completion of renovations to the structure, the first Cliff House burned to the ground. Sutro immediately hired architects Emile S. Lemme and C.J. Colley to draw plans for a new more elaborate Cliff House to replace the first (see photo, History #11). By July 1895, grading and site-work had been completed and construction on the second Cliff House was progressing. On February 1, 1896, Sutro sponsored a formal opening for the new Cliff House and the new Sutro Railroad.

In 1897, Sutro ended his relatively unsuccessful term as Mayor of San Francisco. One year after his return to private life, it became obvious to his friends and family that Sutro's mental capacities were deteriorating, and the court appointed his oldest daughter, Dr. Emma Merritt, as his guardian. At the time of Sutro's death in August 1898, at the age of sixty-eight, creditors and Sutro's other children challenged Emma Merritt's appointed role as guardian and executrix of the Sutro estate.

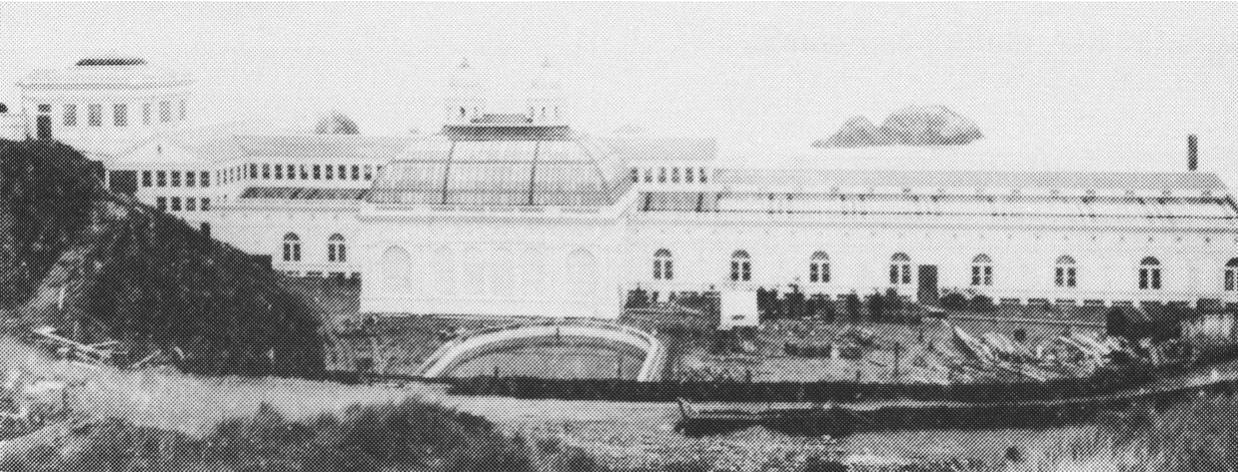
Following Sutro's death, Emma Merritt called for an inventory and appraisal of the property, and found the estate to be deeply in debt. In 1899, Merritt sold the Sutro railroad for the sum of \$215,000 to Robert F. Murrow who renamed it the Sutter Street Cable Car line. Although this sale helped to alleviate financial burdens, Emma Merritt struggled for twenty years to settle the estate. Consequently, the condition of Sutro's Point Lobos properties deteriorated.



History #8: Aquarium, swimming pond, and sea wall. (CLR, 1993)



History #9: Front entry to the Sutro Baths. (CLR, 1993)



History #10: Sutro Baths facing west. (CLR, 1993)



History #11: Second Cliff House and surroundings. (CLR, 1993)

1904 - 1937

Despite financial difficulties, Emma Merritt attempted to maintain Sutro Heights for the enjoyment of the public. Reductions in the grounds staff from eleven to three resulted in decreased maintenance and supervision of the gardens. Plantings requiring intensive maintenance were replaced with those requiring less care, and the upkeep of paths, walks, and structures was neglected. By 1904, the Sutro residence, which had deteriorated significantly, was being used as a caretaker's residence (see photo, History #12).

In 1905, the renowned architect and urban planner Daniel Burnham, recommended that the Cliff House and its adjacent structures be destroyed and replaced with a smaller, more simple structure that would not obstruct the sweeping views of the headlands to the north

In 1906, James Wilkins, who had managed the Cliff House for twenty-one years, was replaced by local entrepreneur John Tait, who bought Wilkin's lease in June 1907. Tait immediately began an ambitious renovation of the Cliff House, with plans to spend up to \$80,000 to rewire, install new plumbing, refurnish, and redecorate. The renovation was brought to an abrupt halt on September 7, 1907, when the ornate, frame structure caught fire and burned to the ground.

One year following the destruction of the second Cliff House, Emma Merritt applied for a permit to construct a third Cliff House on the site of the first two; work commenced in 1908 on a three-story, steel reinforced concrete building. Designed by Reid Brothers, Architects, the rectangular, neo-Classical building cost approximately \$75,000 to construct.

On July 1, 1909, a gala celebration inaugurated the new Cliff House. The third Cliff House prospered for almost a decade, experiencing yet another resurgence of popularity reminiscent of the 1890s. However, in 1918, with the involvement of the United States in World War I, the U.S. Army ordered closure of all establishments within one half mile of military installations. Owing to its proximity to Fort Miley, the Cliff House stood closed for two years. In 1920, the Cliff House re-opened under the new management of Richard Roberts. Renovations at the same time included a three-story, reinforced concrete addition on the north side of the building and enclosure of the front entrance, on the east side of the building. At the same time Point Lobos Avenue outside of the Cliff House was widened from 20 feet to 60 feet, creating a four-lane asphalt road with an adjacent concrete sidewalk on the ocean side. The Cliff House, which again declined in popularity, closed once more in 1925.

In 1920, the ownership of Sutro Heights was transferred to the City of San Francisco under the condition that it be "forever held and maintained as a free public resort or park under the name of Sutro Heights." The Merritts retained a lifetime residence on the property. Between 1920 and 1933, the Merritts continued to allow visitors access to Sutro Heights, but provided for minimal maintenance of the site. Although not officially responsible for the maintenance of Sutro Heights during this period, the City of San Francisco conducted two emergency repairs on the Sutro property made necessary by the 1920 widening of Point Lobos Road, which had destabilized the western cliff face. These repairs included construction of a reinforced concrete roadbed on a section of the Esplanade in 1924 and erosion control measures on the adjacent cliff face to support the west flank of the heights promontory.

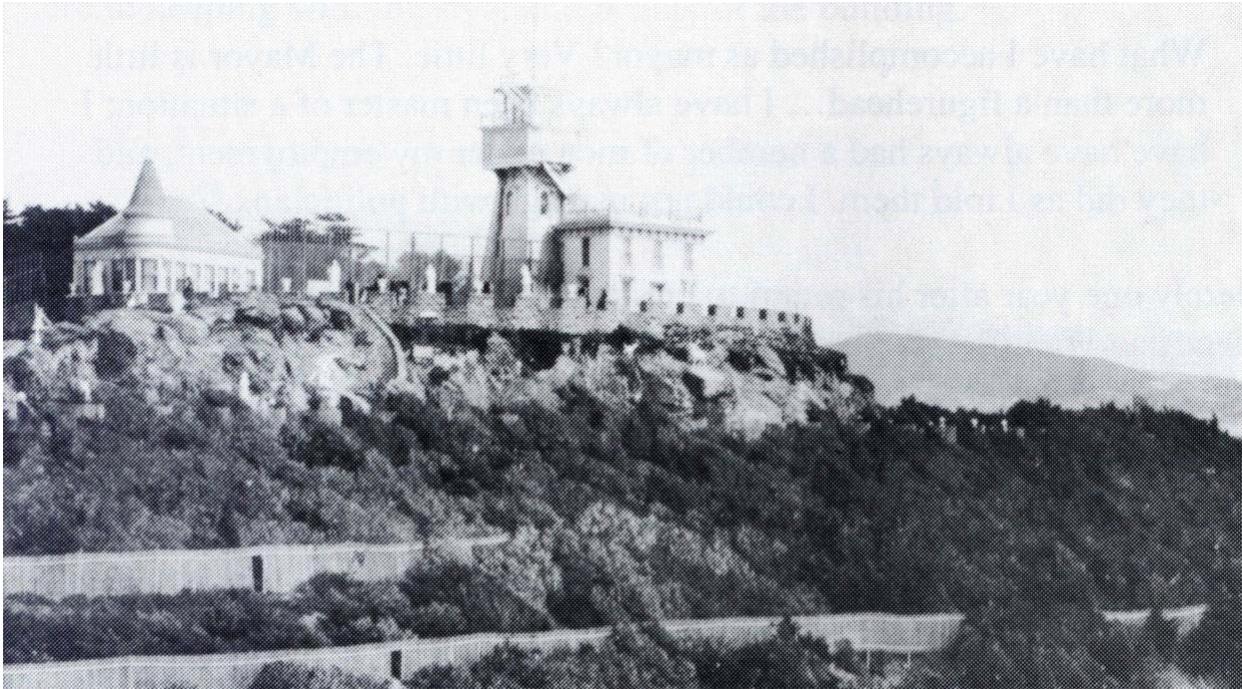
In 1933, at the request of Emma Merritt, the City of San Francisco agreed to assume maintenance of Sutro Heights but there was no major improvement or rehabilitation of the grounds. In 1937, the city submitted a proposal to the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for the rehabilitation of the grounds at Sutro Heights. When Emma Merritt died in residence at Sutro Heights in 1938, the WPA was in the process of further stabilizing the western slopes at the heights through the construction of an elaborate

series of artificial concrete cliffs. Following her death, the WPA proceeded to demolish the aging Sutro residence, then in a state of serious disrepair, the remains of the conservatory, entrance gates and fences, the “Dolce far Niente” Balcony, and the structures on the parapet. At that time some new plant material was added, paths and road surfaces were upgraded, and the remaining statues were cleaned and repaired. The rear stone wall of the parapet was removed and replaced with a concrete retaining wall across the entire rear edge. Staircases were constructed on both ends of the wall to provide access to the parapet terrace.

After its closure in 1925, the Cliff House did not reopen again until 1937 when two brothers, George K. and Leo C. Whitney, purchased the establishment from the Sutro Estate (see photo, History #13). In anticipation of the increased patronage associated with the World’s Fair, to be held in San Francisco in 1939, the Whitney brothers renovated the electrical and plumbing systems at the Cliff House, and incorporated a curio shop and modern restaurant. About that time another small addition, built in the California Mission style with wood, adobe, and tile was added to the north face of the building to provide an entrance to an exhibition of models of the California missions.

Sutro Baths continued to operate as a swimming center, first under the management of Emma Merritt, and then Adolph’s grandson, Gustav Sutro until 1937. At that time, a section of the baths, which had experienced diminished attendance and profits, were converted to an ice skating rink. Some drop in attendance at the baths during the 1920s and 1930s, along with a massive landslide, is attributable to the closing of the famous coastal route of the railroad in 1925.

Additionally, in the early 1930s, the California Board of Health issued a series of stringent regulations regarding the construction, operation, and maintenance of public swimming pools. Compliance with Board of Health requirements would have required costly renovations. Finally, the persistence of the Great Depression throughout the 1930s significantly reduced the number of people who could afford a recreational excursion.



History #12: Sutro Heights, early 1900s. (CLR, 1993)



History #13: Aerial view of the Cliff House and Sutro Baths, 1937. (CLR, 1993)

1937 - 2003

During World War II, Sutro Heights was closed for security reasons because of its proximity to Fort Miley. At that time, a pair of concrete base end stations for range finding was constructed adjacent to the parapet as part of a seacoast fortification defense network. In 1949, the City of San Francisco commissioned a plan for the rehabilitation of the park. The only plan element implemented, however, was the installation of a partial irrigation system.

The Whitney brothers remodeled and enlarged the Cliff House again in the 1950s, resulting in the expansion of the dining room, the construction of a special banquet room, an addition on the south face of the building, and a new top story. The exterior of the building was also modernized, resulting in the alteration of the entire east façade.

In 1951, battered further by an even steeper drop in attendance at the baths during World War II, Gustav Sutro offered the property for sale, explaining to reporters that despite his efforts to promote the baths, he had been unable to raise the \$25,000 to \$90,000 necessary for their proper restoration. Apparently, Sutro had hoped that the City of San Francisco would purchase the baths; instead George K. Whitney, owner of the Cliff House and Playland-at-the-Beach (located at the foot of Point Lobos Avenue) was the purchaser. Whitney converted all of the swimming tanks to one large ice skating complex, and developed a small museum in the baths building. Despite Whitney's efforts to keep the complex open, he lost control of the baths in 1964 when his mother sold the controlling shares of the property to Robert D. Fraser, developer of two of San Francisco's apartment skyscrapers, the Fontana and the Comstock.

Fraser quickly developed plans to raze the Sutro Baths and erect a 200-unit apartment complex and restaurant overlooking the ocean. However, in June 1966, in the midst of negotiations regarding this development and with demolition already underway, a fire at Sutro Baths burned the once-splendid structure to its foundations (see photo, History #14). The public sentiment that arose following the fire may have impeded Fraser's development plans for the site which the National Park Service purchased in 1973 from Cliffside Properties and incorporated into the Golden Gate National Recreational Area.

In 1976, the City of San Francisco transferred ownership of Sutro Heights to the National Park Service, to be managed as part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. National Park Service management efforts have attempted to identify and preserve the historic features on the site. Concrete headers, planters, fountains, and statues were removed for storage and cataloging. Reproductions of the remaining statues, including the entrance gate lions, the Stag, and Diana were cast and re-erected on the site. In the late 1970s selective archeological investigations were undertaken at the conservatory site, on the parapet, along the Esplanade, and the "Dolce far Niente" Balcony.

In 1986, the well house was partially restored. At that time the parapet stonewall mortar was repainted and terrace planters below the wall restored. The NPS began rehabilitation of the Cliff House in 2003.



History #14: Sutro Baths following the fire in 1966. (CLR, 1993)