



NHL Executive Summary



Hawk Tower, Cottage, Stone Walls, East Wing, and Gardens

Name of Property: Tor House (Robinson Jeffers Home)

City, State: Carmel, California

Period of Significance: 1919–1962

NHL Criteria: 2

NHL Theme: III: Expressing Cultural Values
3. Literature
5. Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Design

Previous Recognition: National Register of Historic Places, October 10, 1973

National Historic Context: Mid-Twentieth Century American Poetry, 1919–1962

NHL Significance:

- Tor House is nationally significant under Criterion 2 as the residence of mid-twentieth-century American poet Robinson Jeffers. Robinson and his wife, Una, moved into Tor House in August of 1919, raised their twin sons there, and lived there until their deaths, she in 1950, he in 1962. It was during this time that Jeffers emerged as one of the nation’s most important poets. All of his major works, including



more than eighteen books, were written at Tor House, and it is the location most closely associated with his contributions to American poetry.

- The property expresses Jeffers’s achievements as both poet and stonemason. The design of the original cottage was inspired by a sixteenth-century Tudor barn Una had seen in Surrey, England. The granite boulders that form its walls, gathered from the craggy hill, or “tor,” itself and from the shore below, are set in irregular courses so that Tor House appears to rise naturally from the earth. As a workman during construction of the cottage, Jeffers learned the craft of stonemasonry and later used that skill to build a garage, a wall surrounding the property, Hawk Tower, a dining room, and a separate east wing—all sharing the same organic connection to the coastal landscape.
- The natural landscapes of the Carmel coast, as well as the process of building his stone home with his own hands, deeply influenced Jeffers’s poetry. During his years at Tor House, he adopted a philosophy of life he termed “Inhumanism” that involved “a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man,” a “rejection of human solipsism,” and, most importantly, a “recognition of the transhuman magnificence” of the natural world. These ideas informed his commentary on major events of the time, including World Wars I and II, and anticipated core ideals of the late twentieth-century environmental movement.

Integrity:

- Tor House retains a sufficiently high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association to convey its historic significance and meet the thresholds for designation as a National Historic Landmark.
- All of the property’s contributing resources remain in their historic locations. While Tor House is no longer surrounded by open land as it was during the historic period, the east-west orientation of the parcel maintains, from the house and grounds, unobstructed views of the Pacific Ocean, the little beach where Una bathed in the ocean, and the rocky cliffs from which Jeffers collected stones and salvaged other materials used in the construction of Tor House. Broader vistas of the ocean and Carmel Point are still visible from the various floors of Hawk Tower, further contributing to integrity of setting, feeling, and association.
- Tor House retains a high level of integrity with respect to materials. Repairs through the years have been made in kind. Examples include replacement of the shingle roof with the same type of wooden shingles and a wooden window on the west elevation of the cottage. Tor House cottage also clearly expresses the work of its builders through its materials. While Robinson Jeffers and his son Donnan both used uncut granite stone from the beach to the west, Donnan was primarily responsible for the use of used brick in some areas of the building and grounds.
- Design and workmanship of the poet are clearly visible in the construction of the uncut stone walls, the patina of living on the interiors, and the additive nature of the construction. The grounds retain the vegetation palette, circulation patterns, and objects from the historic period. Feeling and association are further retained in small-scale features such as items collected during family travels and lines of poetry inscribed on some interior spaces.

Owner of Property: Tor House Foundation

Acres of Property: 0.64 acres



Origins of Nomination:

The Robinson Jeffers Tor House was placed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. Hoping to secure further recognition and additional protection for the property, the trustees of the Tor House Foundation began exploring the possibility of National Historic Landmark status in 2016. Since then, a subcommittee of trustees has worked closely with representatives of the NPS National Historic Landmarks Program to collect and present the required documentation.

Potential for Positive Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program:

The Robinson Jeffers Tor House Foundation was established in 1978 to acquire and preserve Tor House, Hawk Tower, and the surrounding landscape for posterity; to promote Jeffers's literary legacy; and to serve the community as a cultural resource. To fulfill this mission, the Foundation sponsors docent-led tours of the property, seminars, poetry readings, musical programs, and other events. Designation as a National Historic Landmark would increase public interest in Jeffers's achievements as a poet and stonemason. It would also draw attention to the vital preservation work of the NHL Program.

Potential for Negative Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program:

None known.

Public Comments Favoring Designation (received as of August 27, 2024):

- Representative Jimmy Panetta, 20th District California, United States Congress
- Dana Gioia, poet and former California State Poet Laureate
- Rachelle Linda Escamilla, California State University–Monterey Bay, Monterey County Poet Laureate
- Representative Sam Farr, former Congressman
- Senator William W. Monning, former California State Senator
- Mary L. Adams, Monterey County Board of Supervisors

Landmarks Committee Comments:

- The Committee requested additional information about potential significance in architecture and landscape architecture. In response, the NHL Program added architecture and landscape architecture to the NHL themes associated with Tor House's significance under NHL Criterion 2.
- The Committee inquired why Una Jeffers is not included in the name of the proposed NHL. Although Una Jeffers's importance in her husband's life and her support for his work are discussed in the nomination, Tor House is being nominated for association with Robinson Jeffers.
- In the comparative analysis, broaden the list of comparable properties to include places associated with other nationally significant poets of the mid-twentieth century, including Gwendolyn Brooks.
- Add brief mention of trade with Haiti in the nineteenth century in the discussion of the Phoenix button.
- Note archeological potential of the site.

Landmarks Committee Recommendation:

The Committee recommends that the National Park System Advisory Board recommend to the Secretary of the Interior designation of Tor House (Robinson Jeffers Home) in Carmel, California, as a National Historic Landmark with any additions and corrections as noted by the Committee being made prior to the nomination being forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior for action.

Advisory Board Recommendation: