

HISTORICAL FOUNTAINS OF THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO AND THE VILLA MONTEZUMA

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During a mitigation project through LSA's Carlsbad office for the City of San Diego, a fountain was uncovered in the backyard of the Villa Montezuma. The Villa is a mansion, built in 1887 in the Sherman Heights area of what would have been the outskirts of New Town San Diego. The fountain had never been documented and was unknown to the City of San Diego engineers and the friends of the Villa. This paper serves to provide analysis of the fountain and a comparison to local fountains in the area.

Fountains, from the Ancient Greeks to modern-day Americans, have been used for varying purposes. They are a symbol of decadence, influence, and ingenuity. Connected to underground aquifers and springs, fountains were utilized as a source of fresh water for drinking water, bathing, and more recently for their aesthetic beauty of sculpture and as an aquatic show.

Fountains are more substantially intricate structure to maintain than wells or cisterns, evident in their detailed architectural makeup, extensive materials, and costs of repair. Studying historical fountains, is of interest as it can add to our understanding of human activity, economics, and availability of resources at the time of their building. Thus, analyzing the style, structure, materials, and technology that went into building them can give us a window into the past.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SETTING

The Villa Montezuma, also known as the Jesse Shepard House, was built in 1887. It is a Queen Anne-style mansion located in the Metro City area of San Diego, in a neighborhood known as Sherman Heights (Eddy 1987:141). The mansion was designed by the architectural firm of Comstock and Trotsche, who worked with a concept of the structure provided by Jesse Alan Shepard, a famous writer, musician, and spiritualist (Crane 1970:4; Eddy 1987:141).

Shepard sold the mansion in 1889, and the property changed ownership many times before being purchased by Frank Lynch, president of Benson Lumber Company (Eddy 1987:142). Frank Lynch and his wife owned the house for 33 years. During this time, in an article in the *Boston Ideas* publication, Caroline T. Pilsbury wrote about her visit to the Villa Montezuma. The article was published on April 16, 1928 in the Topics section and mentioned Frank Lynch, the current owner, and his wife, and described the property. The description indicated that the backyard and garden of the property were very beautiful and that before the present ownership it was in grave disrepair.

After Lynch died in 1942, the house was sold to Flora Craig, who converted the building into small apartments. The structure served as a boarding house until Craig abandoned the property in 1948 (Eddy 1987:142). The property again passed through the hands of many owners until it was purchased by the San Diego Historical Society (known today as the San Diego History Center) in 1970, which gave the property to the City of San Diego one year later, on the stipulation that the house be maintained as a cultural center and museum.

Restoration of the museum began in 1971 and was finished by 1972, when it was opened to the public. A fire in 1986 destroyed many elements of the building's interior, and the museum was closed until 1987 for repairs (Eddy 1987:146-149). In 2006, the museum was once again closed by the City of San Diego due to budget deficits, low attendance, and difficulty with getting Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) approval. The Villa is closed to the public indefinitely and is in need of repairs. The San Diego Historic Sites Board designated the Villa Montezuma as a city historical site in 1970. It was also entered into the National Register of Historic Places in 1971 (Eddy 1987:147).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

My research on the Villa Montezuma and other local fountains began while I was working for the San Diego office of LSA & Associates in May 2012. LSA & Associates is a diversified consulting firm, specializing in environmental, transportation, and planning services. The City of San Diego contracted with LSA for a field investigation for an impending sewer installation at the historical Villa Montezuma. The City's plans are to cap an existing sewer lateral, install a new sewer lateral, and install an ejector pump.

The archaeological investigation began in the backyard of the Villa Montezuma. The crew, consisting of myself and Michael Buxton, excavated seven shovel test pits along the impending sewer line, trending on an east/west route located 5-15 ft. from the south side of the Villa Montezuma. The crew also excavated one shovel scrape and two archaeological test units over a brick-and-mortar feature, later identified as the Villa Montezuma fountain. The seven shovel test pits recovered no artifacts below the surface. The shovel scrape and test units were done to further the research into the brick-and-mortar feature and focused on expanding our knowledge of the nature and extent of the feature, its intended function, and the possible dates of its destruction and demolition. In order to preserve the structure, the crew minimized the size of the area that was excavated, to avoid exposing the brick and mortar to air, dehydration, and potential degradation. The shovel scrape measured 12 x 12 ft. and was excavated to a depth of 4 in. below the existing surface to expose the extent of the brick-and-mortar feature, to determine its depth, width, and other architectural characteristics. The first test unit, Unit 1, measured 2 ft. wide by 8 ft. long and was excavated to 17 in. below the surface. Unit 1 was excavated from the center of the feature to 2 ft. beyond the exterior of its north side. The second test unit, Unit 2, measured 2 x 2 ft. and was located on the south exterior of the feature. Unit 2 was excavated to a depth of 13 in. below the surface. Prior to excavation, it was decided not to collect artifacts unless they were observed to be diagnostic.

RECOVERY AND RESULT

The subsurface investigation revealed the brick-and-mortar feature to be a fountain that was lined with concrete on the top and interior sides and floor. The archaeological testing along the proposed sewer line corridor detected no other archaeological features or significant artifacts. In the shovel test pits, there were modern glass bottle shards, plastic, and paper remnants. The surface scrape produced the following architectural information on the fountain: the wall thickness is 18 in., and mortar remnants are present on the surface of the bricks, indicating that a least one course of bricks has been demolished from the top of the structure. Unit 1 exposed a portion of the exterior, the floor, and the center of the feature. Four courses of brick and mortar were exposed on the exterior, with approximately 4 in. of mortar slop on the bottom. A 5-in. ceramic pipe protruded upward from the exterior wall. The pipe appeared to be routed beneath the structure. Recovered from Unit 1 were historic artifacts that consisted of a dark green bottle glass, a ceramic beer bottle fragment, a small fragment of blue glass, a wire cut nail, and a square nail. One large piece of fabric was exposed on the interior floor of the feature, and a fragment of this material was collected. Unit 2 exposed the exterior of the feature. The portion of the wall exposed in Unit 2 is almost identical in construction to the north exterior wall exposed in Unit 1. The excavations revealed that it was a brick-and-mortar, concrete-lined fountain with a decorative centerpiece. A pipe measuring $\frac{7}{8}$ in. in diameter in the center of the structure and the 5-in.-diameter pipe on the exterior may have supplied water to a center ornament. Construction debris in the fountain fill soils contained brick and mortar debris in a concentration from 6 to 12 in. below the surface. This indicates that the top portions of the fountain walls were demolished and pushed inside the fountain and then covered by soil.

ARTIFACTS

The main diagnostic artifacts of note were two bricks recovered from the fountain. One of the bricks had a partial maker's mark consisting of the letter "X." On researching the maker's mark, it was found that no companies manufactured any bricks with just an "X," but there were many from the

multiple companies that employed the “XX” brand on their bricks (Gurcke 1987:318-319). The sole southern California brick manufacturer using the “XX” brand was the Los Angeles Pressed Brick Co. According to Gurcke (1987:318-319), the “XX” maker’s mark was used until 1927 by this company. Since the fountain apparently was constructed from “XX” bricks, it can reasonably be hypothesized that the fountain was built in the late 1920s. Another brick manufacturer, the Vitrified Products Corporation, operated in the San Diego area during the 1920s near the Villa Montezuma; their manufacturing plant stood where the County mental health offices are now located (Van Wormer 1987:1-17). This plant stood from 1922 into the 1940s. The bricks made by this company were stamped with a “VPC” maker’s mark (Van Wormer 1987:Table 1, Figure 18), but no “VPC” branded bricks were observed during the May 2012 fieldwork.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS

The fountain at the Villa Montezuma was by no means the oldest fountain in San Diego. For example, there was a fountain photographed in the private garden of Alonzo Horton in 1874 by C. P. Fessenden, and the Rancho Guajome courtyard fountain built by Cave J. Coutts, Jr. in the late 1880s (Hector 1999:42). A courtyard fountain was built in the 1880s for the Hotel del Coronado, and finally there was the fountain in Horton Plaza dedicated to Alonzo Horton, built in 1909, with various concerns for public safety due to its being an electric fountain (Amero 1995).

The Villa Montezuma’s fountain is a historical structure indicative of its time period. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of San Diego in 1900 was 17,000, and by 1930 the population was at 147,995. The explosion in population between 1900 and 1930 resulted in extensive development and a reallocation of resources to sustain the growing San Diego population. Some of those developments from the 1920s, at the time period during which we believe the fountain was built, have continued to influence San Diego’s local economy. For example, there was the 1921 claim for water rights to the Colorado River that gave San Diego a consistent source of water. Also in 1921, land was put aside for the San Diego Zoo. In 1923, the first southern all-weather transcontinental highway that terminated in San Diego was dedicated. In 1925, John D. Spreckels funded \$4 million toward the Mission Beach amusement center, and in 1926, the Star of India was purchased by the Zoological Society and brought to San Diego (Pourade 1967). Along with these developments came a push for art and architectural innovations like the Queen Anne-style house, the Villa Montezuma, and its fountain.

ISSUES IN RESEARCH

Many issues came up during the research on local fountains and the Villa Montezuma’s fountain. The definition of what a fountain is and what types of fountains exist came into perspective. Fountains can be designated as water fountains, garden fountains, plaza fountains, fish ponds, and bird feeders. All of these terms have similar aspects of the utilization of water, structure, design, audience, and locations. The proliferation of names and lack of defined differences make it difficult to research a specific type of fountain.

There is very little information on fountains in the archaeological record of California. Currently known fountains are usually preserved and well-documented. If fountains were previously known, then very little recorded information or photographs may be available for them. Descriptions of private and public gardens rarely include notes of a fountain. The Villa Montezuma’s fountain constitutes an interesting find due to its having been buried and lost from historical documentation, and then being found again after archaeological investigations.

While researching the Villa Montezuma and its fountain at the San Diego History Center, an architectural blueprint was uncovered, drawn up in 1972 by Wimmer, Yamada, Iwanga, & Associates. The blueprint was for a planned reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Villa Montezuma and has a spot indicated for the rehabilitation of a fish pond in the exact location of the current fountain. This was an oversight and an apparent loss of information about the Villa Montezuma’s fountain for at least 40 years.

This is puzzling and troubling, because no reason for the loss is clear, but possibilities include failure to turn over data to the City of San Diego, changes of repositories, and advancement of data storage technology going from paper to digital formats. The gravity of this issue is given more weight when examining the County of San Diego general plan and the business of real estate in San Diego. Matt Davis, a land broker for Cushman & Wakefield in San Diego, provided a quote expanding on this issue:

Given the limited quantity of undeveloped land in the urbanized areas of San Diego County and the recent update to the County of San Diego General Plan, which focuses future growth into those unincorporated areas with existing infrastructure, I expect we will see very little future development on previously undisturbed lands. Looking ahead, the majority of future growth within San Diego County will be small and midsize infill redevelopment projects and adaptive reuse of existing structures [Davis, personal communication 2012].

This puts an added focus on our current historical structures for the overall history of San Diego, the development of local communities, and an identity for the future. I believe it is the job of archaeologists and anthropologists in the private and public sectors to explore for this kind of information and, if found, to make these data open and available to the general public and the entities that can most benefit from the information. Overall, the availability of archaeological data can establish a continuity of information between the city and archaeologists, thereby not only helping us to understand and preserve our cultural and architectural history, but also saving precious city funds to be allocated for preservation of these structures that provide public enjoyment and an identity for the city of San Diego.

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