Several year ago, I found a unique artifact on the surface of the ethnographic Coast Miwok village known as Olompali. It was only fifty feet or so from the ruins of the Burdell Mansion. The artifact consists of a bronze cast art object with silver and gold overlay. It measures 1.5” square and weighs 32.1 grams. There is a maritime scene depicted on the front side, consisting of a large sailing ship and three smaller sail boats as well as a row boat (Figure 1). The row boat is depicted beside the large ship and there are two men in the row boat. One may be wearing traditional Japanese Edo Period armor. The large ship is apparently anchored within a bay and the three smaller boats are coming from shore. In the background is a feature that quite likely represents Mount Fuji, as seen from Tokyo Bay.

On the back side of the object are five Kanji characters, the uppermost being partially covered by a post-production clasp attachment (Figure 2). Several East Asian scholars have looked at photos of the Kanji characters and identified them as “Shuzo,” surname of the maker, “Akira,” given name of the designer, and what is probably a foundry mark. Too little of the uppermost character is visible to allow for its identification, but it is probably the date the object was created.

In 1874, Mary Burdell, who was then the owner of Rancho Olompali, took a steamship to Japan, along with a friend of hers, Maria Sweetzer. Mary had just completed a four-year long court battle to secure her rightful inheritance. It appears that Mary’s steamship voyage to Japan was in part for rest and recovery after her excruciating legal battle. At the time, it was not very common for men to travel to Asia, let alone women.

U.S. Commodore Matthew C. Perry had forcibly opened Japan to outside interests just twenty years earlier, during Japan’s Edo Period (1603-1868). By the time of Mary Burdell’s visit, in the Meiji Period (1868-1912), Japan was undergoing massive change as it westernized all aspects of society. In January of 1873, a conscription law was passed creating a modern army. Initially, the upper-class Samurai were resentful of this change, as romanticized in the Tom Cruise movie, “The Last Samurai.” Mary arrived in Japan just as the country was converting to a more Western and modernized society. Although the details of her visit to Japan are not well known, Mary returned to California with various Asian plants for her formal garden, which can still be seen today. She also brought back several Japanese men to work in her garden.

The artifact may have been an ornate nail cover used in a Japanese structure to cover the head of a nail. Or it may have decorated some unknown Samurai accoutrement. As Japan converted from the traditional Samurai organization to a modern army, it is likely that a variety of Samurai items were discarded or traded away, such as swords, saddles, and armor. This object may have once disguised the head of a nail, or perhaps it adorned some aspect of the Samurai world, only to be later repurposed by Mary Burdell to serve as an item of her own adornment, perhaps as a brooch or belt buckle.
Figure 1. Front of the Cast Art Object from Olompali.

Figure 2. Back of the cast art object from Olompali. Note the uppermost of the Kanji Characters, which was partially hidden by the addition of the clasp.