



# Foundation Document Overview

## Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site

California



### Contact Information

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## Purpose



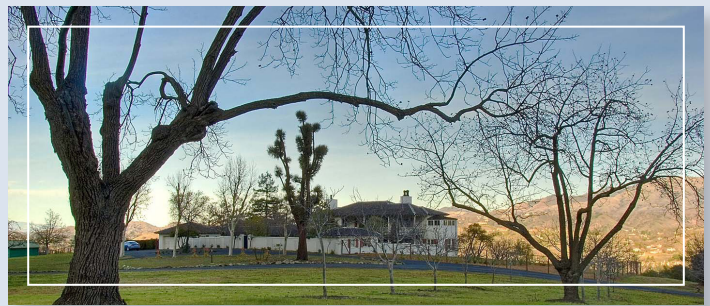
*EUGENE O'NEILL NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE promotes the legacy of O'Neill as the father of modern American drama by preserving his home, Tao House, and providing educational programs, performing arts opportunities, and inspiration for creativity.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Tao House, conceived by Eugene and Carlotta O'Neill, and its setting provided a place of intentional refuge nestled in the hills east of San Francisco Bay where O'Neill's creative genius flourished and he wrote his best and most famous works.
- Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site provides exemplary opportunities to inspire through educational programs and the performing arts within the historic setting that sparked O'Neill's creativity.
- Eugene O'Neill is the only American playwright awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Four of his 51 plays received the Pulitzer Prize.
- Eugene O'Neill has had a transformative and lasting impact on American theater. His emphasis on reflective, introspective realism and his focus on contemporary social issues marked a departure from the previously melodramatic style of theater. His innovative staging and production techniques challenged audiences to take an honest look at the human condition and inspired later playwrights to follow the new direction he charted.
- The Travis Bogard Research Collection and Archive that is housed at Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site is one of the most important repositories of O'Neill materials in the world and offers exceptional opportunities for artistic inspiration as well as scholarly study into the life and works of this great American playwright.



## Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Legacy.** Eugene O’Neill National Historic Site keeps the legacy of Eugene O’Neill alive by providing a variety of opportunities for people to understand his significance and connect to his life and works, including performances, arts education, and creative pursuits. His works and themes continue to resonate with contemporary playwrights and audiences alike. The inspirational setting at Tao House and the performance space in the old barn foster these experiences.
- **Serene Historic Setting.** The serene historic setting at Eugene O’Neill National Historic Site retains the structures, designed landscapes, gardens, orchards, views, and sounds that existed during O’Neill’s time here. The isolated setting provided a refuge for O’Neill to produce his most inspired works. Today, the landscape as a whole offers the visitor the same sense of serenity, refuge, and inspiration.
- **Designed Landscape.** The home, a Monterey Colonial, was built by the O’Neills in 1937, and includes aspects of Asian design and feng shui. Its dark blue ceilings mimic the sky and dark wood floors the earth, and zigzagging courtyard pathways are meant to keep away evil spirits. Eugene O’Neill’s study is where he could isolate himself from the world, and was inspired to write his best and most famous works. The O’Neills considered Tao House to be their final home and harbor, with the courtyard, pool, and gardens creating a nurturing environment in which his creativity could flourish.
- **Museum Collections.** Eugene O’Neill National Historic Site has one of the world’s finest archives and museum collections related to Eugene O’Neill, including historic furnishings, books, personal belongings, manuscripts, and photographic materials. The collection is critical in providing a tangible link to O’Neill’s life and work through educational programs, research opportunities, and both virtual and onsite/offsite exhibition. The park plays a role in increasing the understanding of O’Neill’s significance and perpetuating his legacy through cooperation with institutions holding related collections.

## Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect —park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- **Transformation of American Theater.** Through his use of realism, controversial subject matter, marginalized characters, and new dramatic techniques, Eugene O’Neill transformed American theater into a serious aesthetic and intellectual art form.
- **Role of Class.** O’Neill explored societal inequities by incorporating his own life experiences into his works, making them meaningful for his audience, and demonstrating the power of theater as a catalyst for change.
- **Home.** At Tao House, O’Neill found the refuge he was searching for, where his creative genius thrived.
- **Family.** Eugene O’Neill achieved a great level of literary success through a lifetime of expressing, and seeking to overcome, the raw truths of his family’s dysfunction.



# Description

Eugene O’Neill, one of America’s most prominent playwrights, lived in Tao House in Danville, California, from 1937 to 1944. O’Neill, who is considered to be the father of modern American drama, won four Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize in Literature for his playwriting. O’Neill wrote some of his most famous plays at Tao House, including *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), *Hughie* (1941), *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1941), and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1943).

Tao House, where O’Neill lived with his third wife, Carlotta, provided seclusion from the outside world. The name “Tao House” was inspired by O’Neill’s interest in Eastern philosophy along with Carlotta’s love for Oriental art and decor. Visitors to Eugene O’Neill National Historic Site will experience the beauty, scenery, and solitude of the hillside home in rural California, which provided Eugene O’Neill an ideal location to write his plays.

Eugene O’Neill National Historic Site is situated 20 miles east of the San Francisco Bay and occupies a triangular tract of land almost entirely surrounded by lands that are administered by the East Bay Regional Park District as wilderness. In the early 1970s, the Eugene O’Neill Foundation, Tao House was instrumental in saving Tao House from development and lobbied for its inclusion in the national park system. Named as a key partner in the enabling legislation, the Foundation has always been the lead on artistic and educational programming at the site. The Foundation also maintains one of the most important research collections of O’Neill materials in the world. From student programs to retreats, conferences, and major theatrical performances, the Foundation’s work has been essential to fulfill the purpose of the park and promote greater awareness of Eugene O’Neill’s artistic and cultural legacy.

Tao House was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1971, and the entire property was designated as a national historic landmark in 1976.

Other historic features on the site include an old barn and orchards that predate Tao House, a chicken coop, potting shed, swimming pool, and remnants of the original ornamental landscaping and courtyard, which was restored to its original condition in 1987. Additional historic features, including water tanks, the grave marker of the O’Neills’ dog Blemie, two stone gate pillars, and some of the original orchards are located on adjacent park district lands.

Today the NPS site occupies 13 acres, a small fraction of the 158 acres that the O’Neills originally owned when they purchased the home back in the mid-1930s. The visitor experience at Eugene O’Neill National Historic Site is one of total privacy in the context of quiet natural surroundings, where visitors can gain an understanding of the life of one of America’s most famous playwrights.

