

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.

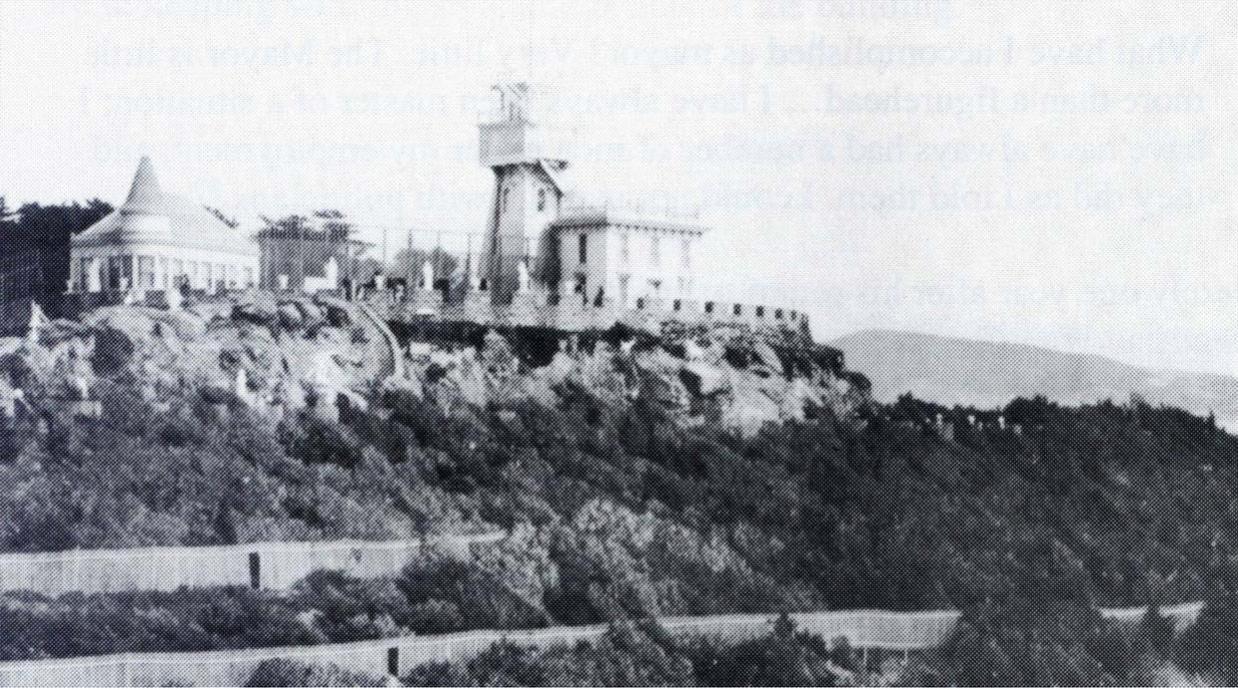
In 1933, at the request of Emma Merritt, the City of San Francisco agreed to assume maintenance of Sutro Heights but there was no major improvement or rehabilitation of the grounds. In 1937, the city submitted a proposal to the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for the rehabilitation of the grounds 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)