

ADOLPH SUTRO'S URBAN FORESTS:

Influences and Lasting Benefits

by Jacqueline Proctor

INTRODUCTION

Philanthropist, engineer, park commissioner, and former mayor of San Francisco, Adolph Sutro (1830–1898) is famous to this day for creating Sutro Baths and transforming the nearby Cliff House restaurant overlooking the Pacific Ocean. His daughter, Emma, wrote about his purchase of a house overlooking the restaurant in 1879 at what is now called Sutro Heights: “Trees were planted, lath fences built, and seeds brought for the garden from all over the world. A conservatory was built, a nursery for young plants established.”¹ With the money he made from selling his stake in the 20,000-foot-long tunnel he engineered to help unlock the silver from Nevada’s Comstock Lode, he bought 1,200 more acres of “sand lots” on the western edge of San Francisco in 1880. He went on to build another and much larger nursery to provide the millions of tree seedlings he would begin planting over a 20-year period on 1,000 of those acres.²

Sutro’s motivations and ultimate plan for the huge forest he created in San Francisco were not formally documented and have, therefore, been subject to much speculation. What we do know is that he bequeathed his Sutro Heights estate garden to the City of San Francisco.³ He welcomed visitors to stroll on his estate and in the forest he planted on Mt. Sutro, which he had “transformed into a forest of a million trees or more, eucalyptus, ash, pine, maple, cypress, acacia, ... laid out rustic walks and bridges winding down ravines and over hills unfolding unsurpassing [*sic*] beauties at every turn.”

Sutro’s forest became “the popular ramble for the Sunday hiker ... and gave a scenic background to San Francisco.”⁴

His will restricted the sale of his land until the death of the last heir, with the proceeds to be put into a charitable trust, although he did not specify the charity or purpose of the trust. However, his personal papers and other historic sources confirm he had philanthropic motivations for creating this forested landscape and intended that it remain for public use in perpetuity.

MOTIVATIONS

The Four Virtues

When Adolph Sutro arrived in San Francisco in 1850, no American city had a public park. The need for public green space in cities was initially met by privately owned cemeteries, which encouraged public recreation as part of their marketing plans. The impetus to create parks built by and for the people came from concerns about creating a better American society. Park promoters in Adolph Sutro’s time believed that parks “fostered four important virtues for a harmonious and good society: public health, prosperity, democratic equality, and social coherence.”⁵

A contemporary of Adolph Sutro and fellow self-made man, Frederick Law Olmstead, was a pioneer in creating the discipline of landscape architecture with his design of America’s first public park in New York City in 1858. Biographer Witold Rybczynski notes:



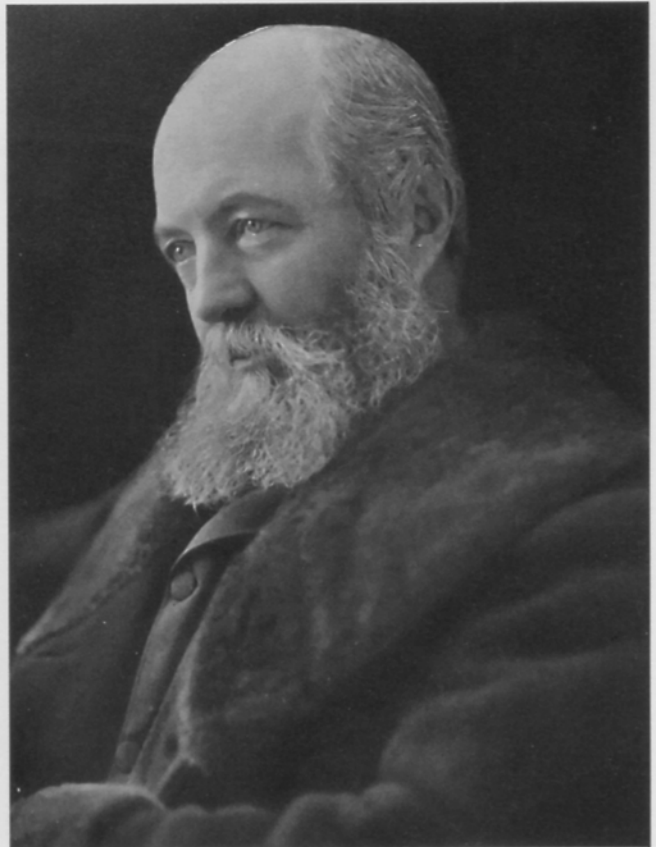
Adolph Heinrich Joseph Sutro (April 29 1830 – August 8, 1898) was the 24th mayor and second Jewish mayor of San Francisco, serving in that office from 1894 until 1896. He is today perhaps best remembered for the various San Francisco lands and landmarks that still bear his name. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

Modern environmentalists often perceive a conflict between the preservation of wilderness and the demands of recreation. Olmstead's paramount motive [in the romantic and surrogate Adirondack landscape he created for Central Park] was recreation — or rather, re-creation. He believed that the contemplation of nature, fresh air, and the change of everyday habits improved people's health and intellectual vigor. "The enjoyment of scenery employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it, tranquilizes it and yet enlivens it; and thus, through the influence of the mind over the body, gives the effect of refreshing rest and reinvigoration of the whole system. ..." [Olmstead's work to protect Yosemite as a public park] opened his eyes to an exciting new possibility: the experience of scenery, whether man-made or natural, could be a powerful civilizing force. ... he realized he could combine his interests in social reform and landscaping.⁶

Sutro may have met Olmstead during his many trips to San Francisco or read his horticulture articles and books. In any case, Sutro writes in his personal papers that he shared Olmstead's belief in the connection of nature and personal improvement from tree-filled landscapes:

These western shores should become the lands of the culture groves and artistic gardens. ... to reach this happy consummation, a taste for the beautiful in nature must be engendered among the masses. ... In my boyhood days, while still a dreamer on the banks of the beloved Rhine ... a tranquil-eyed tutor taught me the wisdom of the philosophy and this is what he said: "My son, live ever near to Nature's heart, for to depart from nature is a departure from happiness. Choose thy companions among such cherished trees and flowers and little children. The man who loves these can never commit a crime." This is the philosophy that I wish to transmit to those who would survive me.⁷

Andrew Jackson Downing, the first writer on American landscape gardening and Olmstead's



Portrait of Frederick Law Olmsted. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

mentor, was inspired by the public parks he had seen in Adolph Sutro's native country, Germany, as well as in France and England. It was Downing who taught Olmstead the difference between a garden and a park. The former could be decorative and artificial, but the latter had to be the antithesis of the city, a natural appearing landscape.⁸ The parks that Olmstead subsequently created, which inspired San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, consisted of "naturalistic" landscapes of pastoral and picturesque scenery designed to foster prosperity, public health, democratic equality, and social coherence. Sutro's creation of his naturalistic landscape of thick forests on Mt. Sutro and Mt. Davidson for the Sunday hiker was consistent with these goals.

When Sutro started his tree planting in San Francisco, the city's first public park was just getting started. Golden Gate Park opened in 1875, but was not completed until many years later. Prior to its creation, city residents were drawn to private gardens created as amusement parks, such as The Willows and Woodward's Gardens.⁹ Sutro had already created



*Inner Sunset views of Mt. Sutro and Mt. Davidson in 1886, before Sutro's forest planting.
Courtesy of Open SF History/Western Neighborhoods Project.*

his own version with his bathhouse and amusement park at Land's End.

Terence Young, in his book *Building San Francisco's Parks*, writes how San Francisco in Sutro's time was considered a stark environment. While not as densely populated as New York City, the area was virtually treeless. Coastal scrub and grasses were the predominant vegetation. Woodlands were limited to damper lowlands where streams flowed into the bay. Scrubby live oak on the hills and ridges of the eastern 270 acres of what would become Golden Gate Park "seldom attained a height of more than 10 feet. ... Olmstead described San Francisco as 'perfectly bare of trees or shrubs – and almost awfully bleak.' ... Park advocates sought relief from an environment that struck them as profoundly alien. ..." ¹⁰ Olmstead's plan for New York City's Central Park aligned with what Sutro sought to provide for the public on his own land in San Francisco: "A thick plantation of trees and shrubs created the desired visual barrier between the refreshing, verdant interior and the exhausting

urban environment so that San Franciscans, like New Yorkers, could escape from city into rural life. ... Also in San Francisco's unique physical site, the boundary of greenery served as a ... buffer between the prevailing bluster and the interior plants and visitors." ¹¹

The virtuous goals for these naturalistic and romantic landscapes have now been scientifically proven. Studies by the USDA have found that urban trees significantly reduce the noise of a city. Tall trees with dense crowns and a soft ground surface can cut noise by 50 percent or more. If kept healthy and cared for properly, urban trees can also provide bird and wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities, improve soil quality, reduce erosion, and add to property value. USDA studies also suggest that urban trees help to provide a feeling of community well being. Several have proven that trees contribute to a decrease in property crimes and a better economy. Research has also shown that real estate in wooded areas is bought and rented more quickly. ¹²

A 2010 *New York Times* article reported:

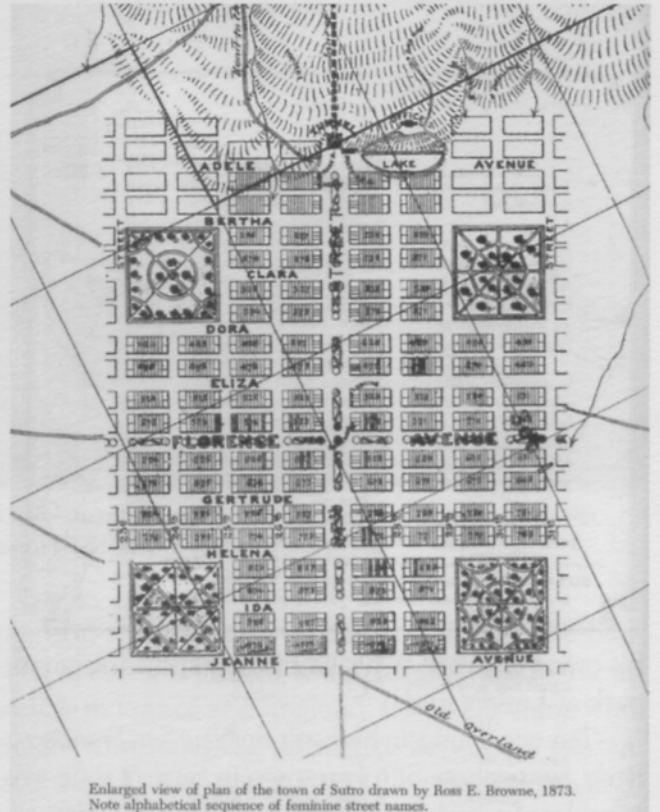
In a series of studies, scientists found that when people swap their concrete confines for a few hours in more natural surroundings — forests, parks and other places with plenty of trees — they experience increased immune function. Stress reduction is one factor. But scientists also chalk it up to phytoncides, the airborne chemicals that plants emit to protect them from rotting and insects and which also seem to benefit humans.

A study published in January included data on 280 healthy people in Japan, where visiting nature parks for therapeutic effect has become a popular practice called *Shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing). On one day, some people were instructed to walk through a forest or wooded area for a few hours, while others walked through a city area. On the second day, they traded places. The scientists found that being among plants produced “lower concentrations of cortisol, lower pulse rate, and lower blood pressure,” among other things.

A number of other studies have shown that visiting parks and forests seems to raise levels of white blood cells, including a study in 2007 in which men who took two-hour walks in a forest over two days had a 50-percent spike in levels of natural killer cells. And another found an increase in white blood cells that lasted a week in women exposed to phytoncides in forest air.¹³

Sutro's Pioneering Landscape in Sutro, Nevada

The most comprehensive researchers of Adolph Sutro to date, Robert and Mary Stewart, describe how he decided to create the model town of Sutro at the entrance of his Comstock Lode Tunnel in 1872. It included plans for broad sidewalks, two tree-lined boulevards, and four parks. According to the Stewarts:



Enlarged view of plan of the town of Sutro drawn by Ross E. Browne, 1873. Note alphabetical sequence of feminine street names.

Adolph Sutro's 1872 Landscape Design Plan for his model town in Sutro, Nevada. Courtesy of the author.



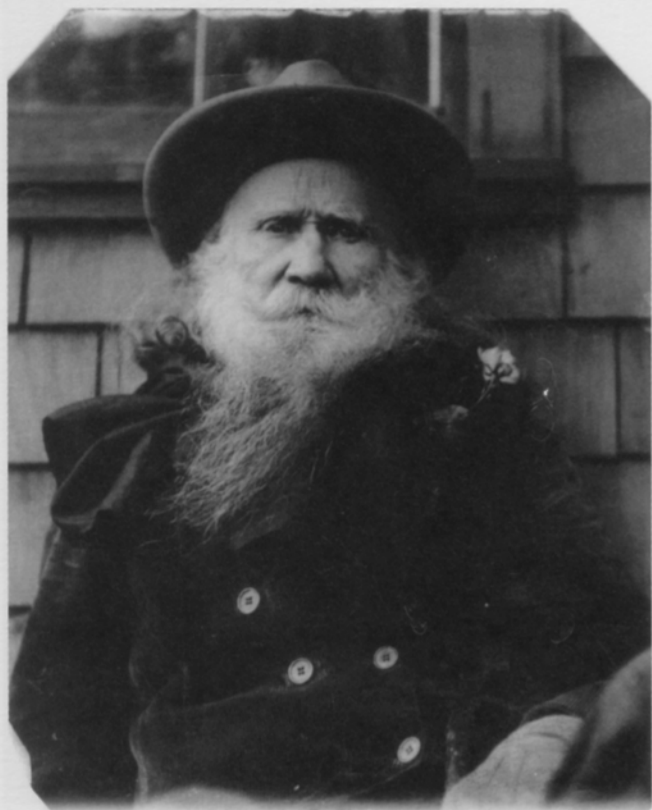
Stereoscopic view of forested Adirondack-like landscape created by Frederick Law Olmstead in Central Park, New York City. Courtesy of New York Public Library's Milstein Collection.

Sutro started developing an interest in trees that would stay with him for the rest of his life. He owned a few trees before, but now saw in them a way to benefit mankind. He would have trees planted ... at company expense and the sale of the lots would be contingent upon the purchaser's planting and caring for a tree in front of his house. Trees were good for people. They improved the appearance of a town, they furnished shade and brought other benefits, so trees

people must have. ... each eleven-acre park was planted with trees and alfalfa. There were 2,000 Lombardy poplars in North Square and cottonwoods in South Square. On the Moore ranch a tree nursery had been established and 1,000 honey locusts, 500 spruce trees, 1,000 elms, 500 sugar maples and 4,000 Lombardy poplars were being cared for.¹⁴

Joaquin Miller and California's First Arbor Day in 1886

Arbor Day was created by nature lover and Nebraska newspaper editor J. Sterling Morton in 1872 as a tree-planting holiday. During the 1870s, states passed legislation to observe Arbor Day, and the tradition began in schools in 1882.¹⁵ This coincided with, or perhaps helped stimulate, the great eucalyptus boom in California in the 1870s, led by Ellwood Cooper and Abbot Kinney, who "believed that one's horticultural environment could provide moral and aesthetic uplift,"¹⁶ and that "... trees made the land more complete, more beautiful, more useful and more healthful...."¹⁷



Poet Joaquin Miller. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center,
San Francisco Public Library.

In 1866 the poet Joaquin Miller urged the establishment of an Arbor Day celebration in California, which involved Adolph Sutro and the San Francisco Presidio in "a vigorous campaign to arouse interest in planting trees on the barren hills surrounding San Francisco Bay."¹⁸ Adolph Sutro's personal papers include this description of how Joaquin Miller and two other poets, John Vance Cheney and Ina D. Coolbrith, both loved trees and had been active in planting them:

... proposed, to the Board of Forestry and such men as Adolph Sutro, General Howard, and General Vallejo, that we should found an Arbor Day, and celebrate the event by planting an Arbor Day cross on some conspicuous spot, where it would be always seen, and perpetually plead the sanctity of the tree and the cause of our common Mother. The government gave Yerba Buena Island for the purpose. ... General Howard sent soldiers to prepare the ground. ... Just below the summit of the Island, upon its southern slope, at a point opposite the Graveyard, a large section of land in the shape of a cross had been cleared of sod and bushes.¹⁹

Growing up in Oregon, Miller's sympathy with the plight of the Modocs in California reflected in his autobiographical novel, *Life Among the Modocs*, is credited with inspiring his early environmental advocacy, railing against desecration of streams through gold mining, the wholesale removal of forests, and resulting loss of salmon and other wildlife that were the tribe's sustenance.²⁰ Joaquin Miller's Arbor Day poem, "written for the occasion which he read with much feeling and earnest emphasis" on November 27, 1886, reflects this advocacy:

Arbor Day

Against our golden orient lawns
We lift a living light today
That shall outshine the splendid bronze
That lords and lights that lesser bay.
Sweet paradise was sown with trees
Thy very name, lorn Nazareth,
Means woods, means sense
of birds and bees,
And song of leaves, with leaping breath.
God gave us mother-earth, full blest,

With robes of green in healthful fold
 We tore the green robs from her breast
 We sold our mother's robes for gold.
 We sold her garments fair, and she
 Lies shamed and naked at our feet
 In penitence we plant a tree
 We plant the cross and count it meet.
 For here, where Balboa's waters toss,
 Here in this glorious Spanish Bay
 We plant, the cross, the Christian cross
 The Crusade cross of Arbor Day.²¹

The Oakland Tribune reported on the speech by General O. O. Howard, Civil War veteran, commander of the Pacific, at the first California Arbor Day event, which summarized the altruistic goals of the endeavor:

The war was over, and they had gathered there, maid and matron, youth and age, full of enthusiasm for a noble purpose — to plant the cross. It was a glad occasion in which all could unite without regard to race, religion, or sectional prejudice. ... The planting of the cross was emblematic of good will to all men, and the inauguration of Arbor Day in this state should serve as an example for others — it was an occasion symbolic of love for the Lord our God, and love of our neighbors as ourselves.²²

These notes on the first Arbor Day are from Sutro's personal papers:

The first tree was planted by Sutro, introduced as the man who had done more than any other man in California to advance tree planting, having personally set out half a million trees annually for two or three years. ... A cedar was planted by president Abbot Kinney, Chairman of the State Board of Forestry. While the band played "America," a vast number of visitors, under the direction of the managers of the occasion, fell to work delving the soil with garden trowels and other implements, and the outlines of the cross were soon plainly defined by numberless little sprays of green.

All the day before the teams were hauling 45,000 seedling pine, donated by the Adolph Sutro nursery to the public school children, from Sutro Heights to the storerooms of the school department, corner of Larkin and Pine Sts. At nine o'clock the janitors received the trees and conveyed them to the different schools, where they would be distributed among the pupils in the afternoon. As they trundled to school this morning nearly every one of the pupils carried a flower pot or tin of some kind, and by this afternoon the little trees will be distributed to thousands of homes. ... And while the children planted their saplings on the hillside of Yerba Buena, the other children, boys and girls of the it



View of tree-less Yerba Buena Island in 1867, when it was called Goat Island.
 Courtesy of Open SF History/Western Neighborhoods Project.



Tree-covered Yerba Buena Island in 1938. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

wasgrammar school and high school, planted the hills of Fort Mason and the Presidio. And from that day Sutro was called the “father of tree planting” in California.²³

Sutro’s speech at this ceremony (12 years before his death), documents his plan for the forest to be preserved and his philanthropic reasons for creating it:

It is my pleasure to plant trees and watch their progress. They are the children of my old age, which will live long after I am laid to rest. Whoever places a seed in the earth is king over unreckoned forces. In my visionary moments I can see spreading branches and hear the rustling of leaves around which future generations will live, and strive, and achieve their successes; for this is, indeed, a country of glorious possibilities. If only we do our part, these rivers and lakes, the beautiful bay of San Francisco, the solitary cliffs, and the pallid snow peaks, shall one and all become classic ground. It is man’s labor, and the heroic deeds of men, which put new and more divine seal to nature’s fairest scenes. I have crossed the Atlantic twenty times, and lived in every European capital. I have traveled in every country endeared to worshippers of art, literature, science and religion. ... and yet I return to Sutro Heights satisfied to live out my allotted time, here beneath these matchless skies, and repose, at last on the sands that have favored my efforts at fertilization. These green-robed hills and beds of blooming flowers you see, were not so many years ago, quite bare and barren of vegetation. ... There are thousands of acres yet to be cultivated. ... I would encourage both by precept and example, a taste for horticultural pursuits, as may be inferred by the gift of trees to school children, to be planted by them upon approaching Arbor Day. ... It is the refinement which comes from a love of nature, the simplicity fostered in rural homes, that restless Americans need. Tired people will, I trust, learn to ramble every year in ravine and forest, and find renewed health in the presence of the wonderful mountains. ...



Presidio of San Francisco, 1887. This photograph was taken facing west and shows the Presidio Boulevard approach to the Post. The trees, planted in 1882 when Major General Irwin McDowell was commander of the Western Department, today cover the hillsides. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.



Aerial view of mature Presidio forest. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Among the millions of trees already planted, 400,000 of which have been placed south of Golden Gate Park, those that grew most prolifically in sandy soil were chosen from the cypress, the eucalyptus, and Mariana, a species of the pine originally found near the Black Sea. The special virtue of the eucalyptus consists in its rapid growth and its shelter to the trees which surround it. Betwixt the ocean and the Industrial School, occupying a space of a mile and half each side of the road, the same species can be selected. ...



*Looking southwest from Strawberry Hill in 1880 of tree planting to stabilize Sunset sand dunes for creation of Golden Gate Park.
Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*



*Aerial view of now forested Golden Gate Park surrounded by dense residential neighborhoods by 1948.
Courtesy of Open SF History/Western Neighborhoods Project.*

In this work of planting trees, which extends from an altitude of 920 feet ... I have naught else but the interest of humanity at heart. ... when an unemployed situation arose in the city, I employed a gang of men out of work to dig holes, to plant, and to water the trees. ... The work of setting out the young trees ... gave employment to from forty to sixty men.²⁴

Adolph Sutro's planting of trees in support of Arbor Day is further described in notes by his daughter, Emma Sutro Merritt:

In reference to tree planting, there is an account in Joaquin Miller's Poetical Works of the first Arbor Day in San Francisco on November 27, 1886. The celebration was promoted by Joaquin Miller, Adolph Sutro, General Vallejo and General O. O. Howard among others from San Francisco and Oakland. ... Adolph Sutro, as his contribution to the first Arbor Day, gave trees to be planted by the school children of Oakland and San Francisco. Climate has been modified and many a sandy bare monotone in San Francisco has been beautified by the massed dark accent of Mr. Sutro's trees.²⁵

Richard Walker, in his book *Country in the City*, honors Joaquin Miller as one of the first of California's environmentalists:

John Muir and the Sierra Club were hardly a voice in the wilderness for the Sierra Nevada. Fulsome paeans to Yosemite, the Big Trees, and the High Sierra had been coming out of San Francisco since before the Civil War. These were voiced by a generation of ecstatic Californians such as James Mason Hutchings (editor of *California*), Thomas Starr King (San Francisco's leading minister), Joaquin Miller (the state's poet laureate), and Clarence King (author of *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*).²⁶

Joaquin Miller planted eucalyptus and other tree species on his 425-acre Oakland property, which was given to the city as a gift by the poet's widow in 1913. Walker credits this park as inspiring Bay Area open space and recreational advocacy over the years. "It was a barren hillside, the original redwood forest

having been logged off. ... the first thing Miller did was to plant pine and fir in the form of an immense cross, so that it would be visible many miles away."²⁷

Additional documentation that Joaquin Miller motivated Adolph Sutro to plant trees is recorded in a section of a December 1929 article entitled "Once Barren Hill" in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about the dedication of a park atop Mt. Davidson:

Research by Mrs. Edmund [Madie] Brown, a prime mover for the mountain's preservation as a City beauty spot, has brought to light the fact that the mountain was not always covered with stately trees. In the days when Don Jose de Jesus Noe owned it as part of his San Miguel Rancho, it was but a barren, rocky hill sheltering the quiet valley of the Mission from the cold winds of the Pacific. ... When the mountain was part of the property owned by Adolph Sutro, Joaquin Miller, the poet, who was enthusiastically planting trees on the "The Heights" in the east bay envisioned the beauty that might be created by trees on Blue Mountain and suggested the plan to Sutro.²⁸

Civic Responsibility and Philanthropy

In addition to his commitment to beautifying urban open spaces, Sutro also supported other civic and environmental needs. His personal papers describe the many requests he received from individuals and organizations for financial help. "He felt a great wrong was committed against a man from whom employment was withheld. He supplied hundreds of men and women with tickets and food for lodging at the Salvation Army. ... Mayor Sutro the great good friend of the poor."²⁹

Like Joaquin Miller, Sutro was a pioneer environmentalist. He protected the seals off nearby Point Lobos by successfully lobbying Congress to pass a law putting the area in trust for the American people.³⁰ Notes in his papers also include his promotion of the establishment of branch libraries in the outlying districts and the provision of funds for providing those without work with employment:

In all his activities, he had this quality of universality, without which no work can endure, whether in the arts or city planning, of includ-



View of "barren" Mt. Davidson in 1887 before tree planting by Adolph Sutro. Author's Collection.

ing the many with the few. He always beautified in the direction of his property, but never without including the masses. He was of the type of enlightened citizen who realizes self-interest is best served by best serving the public.³¹

Sutro's papers reveal a speech he wrote that advocated street tree planting – a beautification policy promoted to this day:

To beautify the city is the duty of every citizen owning property. Very little heretofore, has been done to that end. Tree planting in front of every lot in the residence parts, whether already built upon or not, should receive more attention. Dracaenas, acacias, and cypress are fine ornamental trees. ... This subject should be taken hold of by the Improvement Clubs, which could bring property owners together to adopt a uniform system of tree planting. Gardens in front of dwelling houses beautify the city, and the cultivation of flowers elevates the tastes of our inhabitants.³²

Also from his papers, a section titled "*Chronicle* July 27, 1895," describes his 26-acre gift of the UCSF campus:

Offered the affiliated colleges a site for new buildings which is estimated by selling price of lots in the neighborhood to be worth \$250,000. ... will reserve enough room for the Sutro Library building but am willing to deed the remainder free of cost to the U.C.

You probably know that some years ago I reserved a magnificent site ... which was specifically selected for its admirable protection against a general conflagration, no matter how much the city may extend ... the project on either side.

This site ... is well sheltered from the Westerly winds, has been planted with trees that form a beautiful grove, and commands a superb view of the [Golden Gate] Park, the ocean, the Golden Gate, Marin County, and a portion of Contra Costa.³³

LASTING LEGACY

Residence Parks Inspired by the City Beautiful Movement

By the time of Sutro's death in 1898, his forest on the western side of San Francisco extended for miles, from Mt. Sutro south to Ocean Avenue. His will stipulated that "Rancho San Miguel could not be sold until ten years after the death of his last heir, at which point the proceeds could be used to fund a trust for charitable purposes."³⁴ His heirs battled over the will, and those who wanted to sell his property for home development succeeded in getting it overturned by the California Supreme Court. Prominent developer A. S. Baldwin had surveyed the property for that potential, and according to the *San Francisco Call* in 1911, purchased 724 acres for \$1.4 million. Sutro's forest became the theme for the new residence parks Baldwin created there: St. Francis Wood, Forest Hill, Westwood Park and Highlands, and Sherwood Forest. Sutro's



Avid book collector Adolph Sutro, at home in his own library.
Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

trees were incorporated into the new neighborhood landscape designs, along with curvilinear streets and decorative fountains, as recommended by the City Beautiful Movement plan for San Francisco created by famed architect Daniel Burnham in 1905.³⁵



View of Mt. Davidson's forested southern slopes in 1910. Author's Collection.



View south toward Mt. Sutro and Affiliated Colleges in 1910. Courtesy of Open SF History/Western Neighborhoods Project.

A 1923 article in *Home Designer* magazine promoted Sutro's trees in the Balboa Terrace and Forest Hill subdivisions as defining their quality of life and attaining the virtues desired in the public park movement:

A vast expanse of wooded land – trees swayed by the soft, fragrant breeze from the broad Pacific rolling at its feet. ... Surroundings such as these enhance the beauty of every type of architecture. The English cottage – how truly charming it looks among the trees, ... Environment – how wonderful or how insidious it can be. Beautiful surroundings result in elevated thoughts and better thinking and living.³⁶



Remnant of Sutro's forest in 1920 surrounding decorative staircase built for Forest Hill residence park. Courtesy of Open SF History/Western Neighborhoods Project.

Sutro's Forest as an Impetus for a Public Park and Annual Civic Event

Developer A. S. Baldwin built a trail through Sutro's forest to the top of the highest hill in San Francisco when he acquired the property. Previously referred to as part of the San Miguel Hills, the hill had just recently been officially renamed: "On Feb. 23, 1910, members of the Sierra Club hiked into what was called 'the little wildernesses of the Sutro Forest,' and held a ceremony renaming the peak in honor of George P. Davidson who had been greatly respected for this incorruptibility as a surveyor and for his many contributions as a geologist, noted surveyor and naturalist, at the request of the Sierra Club."³⁷

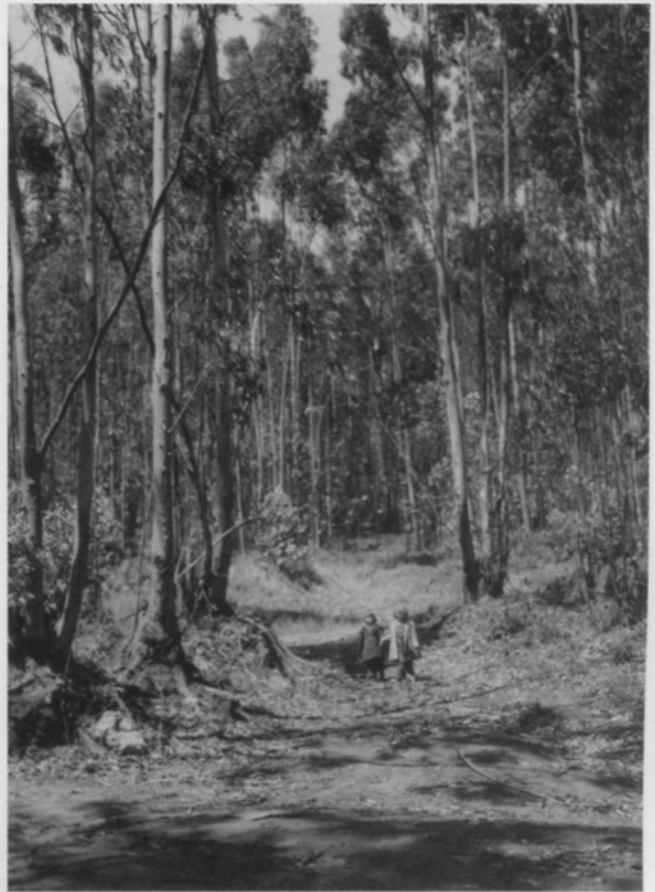
One of those to take the hike up Mt. Davidson a decade later was Western Union employee and San Francisco resident James Decatur. He was so inspired by what he experienced that he wrote and published an essay about it in 1923:

As the group found themselves deeper in the wood ... peace and quiet were so profound that it seemed almost unbelievable that the noise and roar of a great city was only a few minutes behind them. ... the solitude of the forest ... conveyed a sense of vastness quite as real as one would experience among the age old monarchs of the high Sierras.³⁸

Adolph Sutro, who was of Jewish heritage, did not plant his trees on Mt. Davidson in the shape of a cross like Joaquin Miller did, but Decatur's hike through Sutro's forest inspired him to organize an Easter sunrise event at the top of Mt. Davidson in 1923 around a temporary 40-foot-high wooden cross. With more than 5,000 people hiking before dawn to welcome the sunrise, Decatur urged his fellow organizers to make it an annual event (one that continues to this day).³⁹

According to the April 1928 issue of *The Municipal Employee*, a week after the Easter sunrise event in 1926:

... when the sub dividers' axe and steam shovel were heard on Mt. Davidson's lower slopes, destroying in ruthless fashion the beauties of nature, an ardent nature lover, Mrs. Edmund N. Brown, was aroused over



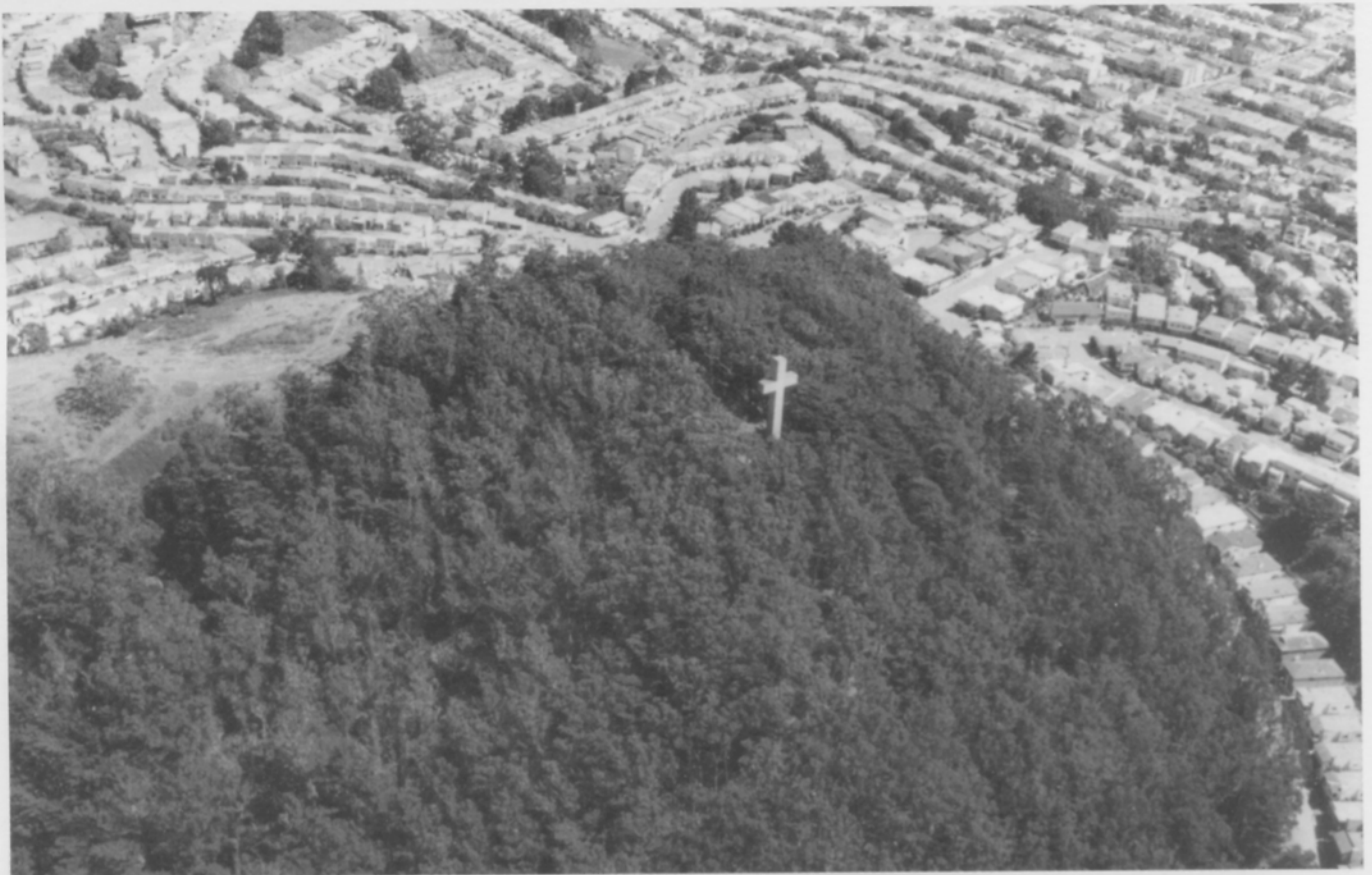
Children walking through eucalyptus forest on Mt. Davidson in 1943. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

the destruction, and made a plea at the Commodore Sloat Parent-Teachers' Association on April 12, 1926, for the preservation of Mt. Davidson. ... Mrs. Brown interested Mrs. A.W. Stokes, at the time president of the City and County Federation of Women's Clubs ... and in so doing placed the strength of the Federation's membership of 15,000 women behind the movement.⁴⁰

Richard Walker highlights the role of women in preserving Bay Area open space: "The San Francisco Bay Area harbors the greatest urban greenbelt in the U.S. Out of 4.5 million acres in the nine-county region, more than 3.5 million are open space ... thanks to a century-old environmental movement ... primarily led by women. ... Every acre of land and water has been fought for, often in campaigns lasting years."⁴¹

It took three years for the city to yield to the political activism led by Mrs. Brown. Preservation of Sutro's trees was clearly the Brown force's motivation for asking the City and County of San Francisco to buy the property for a city park (the eastern treeless part formerly owned by Leland Stanford of present day Mt. Davidson Park was added to it in 1941), as noted in an editorial in the *San Francisco Examiner* supporting city purchase of the land: "As the residential area advances, the forest goes down before the axe. In another year, it will be too late for the beauty of the summit to be preserved. ..." ⁴² Three days later, a report to the finance committee of the board of supervisors recommended that the city purchase the summit of Mt. Davidson "for a public park serving the needs of the West of Twin Peaks District and also serving as a recreation center and forest playground for the whole city. The acquisition will also preserve for all time the beautiful tree covered slopes of the mountain as an attractive scenic landmark in the city." ⁴³

Sutro's lush forest on Mt. Davidson uniquely met the criteria of pioneer urban park advocates like Frederick Olmstead: "the green space had to be sufficiently expansive and vertical to block out a visitor's view of the city, because a park's reforming capability came from its natural scenery." ⁴⁴ San Francisco had considered Golden Gate Park sufficient for the whole city until 1900. After a reform effort led to a new city charter in 1900, the city began to purchase additional property in other areas for park purposes, but for rationalistic rather than romantic purposes: playgrounds and play fields rather than immersion in nature. ⁴⁵ The sum of \$15,000 was appropriated by the city to purchase the first 20 acres on Mt. Davidson in 1927 with the support of Mayor Rolph. Implementation of the purchase from developer August Lang lingered for two more years, as his original proposal was to sell the city 78 acres at \$4,000 an acre. He also wanted the city to build a reservoir to serve the homes he was building on the slopes of Mt. Davidson. He proposed donating a



Aerial view of Mt. Davidson Park surrounded by dense residential neighborhoods in 1995. Author's Collection.

six-acre piece for the construction of an ornamental concrete reservoir 50 feet in diameter, constructed so that it could be used as a platform for Easter memorial services and a right of way for concealed pipelines to and from the said reservoir. The city's right-of-way agent comments in his July 1927 memo to the board of supervisors that Lang's offer was higher than comparable purchases in the area, but "on account of the wooded condition of this land it is probably worth more."⁴⁶

The purchase was finally completed in 1929. Sutro's wish that his forest landscape be maintained and remain accessible to the public after his death was granted 31 years later, when on December 20, 1929, the 20-acre summit of San Francisco's highest hill was dedicated as a public park on Park Superintendent John McLaren's 84th birthday "as a fitting tribute to one who has done so much to create beauty in the city."⁴⁷ Original plans for Mt. Davidson Park called for a playground and playing field to be built and for grass to be planted on a portion of the hillside. At the dedication ceremony, the president of the Westwood Park Association pointed out that "the plan [at Mt. Davidson] is to preserve as many of the trees as possible. ... In the minds of local residents, the ideal of the romantic contemplative park had won out over the rationalistic recreational one ... due to the widespread acceptance of the ideal of park as wilderness [even if man-made]."⁴⁸ Adolph Sutro's belief in the virtuous value of the forest he created is reflected in the words of a plaque dedicated at the event: "Dedicated to Madie D. Brown, who found beauty in flower and tree on this lofty hill. Through her untiring pleas, these acres have been set aside as a city park that all may enjoy their beauty and find refreshment of the soul."⁴⁹

Sutro's Forest: Romantic vs. Rationalistic Values in the New Millennium

In his 1886 Arbor Day speech, Adolph Sutro stated his hope that he would be remembered for the forests he created and that the forests would still be there a century later for the public to enjoy:

One hundred years from today, the people who inhabit this country will celebrate the centennial of this occasion ... then the people of the Pacific Coast will number as many



Under the sponsorship of the Landmarks Council, a new bronze plaque, honoring Mrs. Madie D. Brown, was installed in a rock on Mt. Davidson in 1955. The original plaque, commemorating Mrs. Brown's efforts to preserve the area for a park, was defaced. Right to left: Unidentified; Max Funke, superintendent of parks; Mrs. Deane Stewart, president, West Portal PTA; and Mrs. Brown. Courtesy of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

as now comprise the population of the United States, and they will wander through the majestic groves rising from the trees we are now planting, reverencing the memory of those whose foresight clothed the earth with emerald robes and made nature beautiful to look upon.⁵⁰

More than a century after Sutro planted his forest to beautify and improve the lives of his fellow San Franciscans, the last remnants of his romantic landscape in Mt. Davidson Park and on Mt. Sutro are being proposed for removal for a variety of rationalistic reasons. The primary reason is that the eucalyptus and Monterey Pine trees are foreign plant species that are crowding out native grasses and shrubs that existed in San Francisco before the arrival of Europeans. This is despite the fact that Sutro's trees in Mt. Davidson Park have yet to invade the treeless side once owned by Leland Stanford.⁵¹

Fire hazard is put forth as another reason to clear the trees. In fact, the forest serves as a sponge for the persistent fog that blows over Mt. Davidson and Mt. Sutro during the warm and dryer months of the year. In the summer months, the dense tree canopy has been found to increase fog drip by 300 percent onto the trails, creating small streams along the roads from the summits, often making them muddier than in the winter.⁵² Several of the earliest crosses built at the top of Mt. Davidson for the sunrise service were made of wood and set on fire by vandals. All three of the fires (1928, 1930, and 1931) were quickly contained, despite the challenging access to the forested site at the time.⁵³ The vegetation management plan for the comparable historic forest landscape in the San Francisco Presidio notes, “because moisture from fog drip reduces the impact from summer drought, wildfire has had little effect on the structure or health of the forest.”⁵⁴

Another reason used for clearing a large number of the trees is that they are at the end of their lifespan and have grown too thick to allow new growth. UC Berkeley forestry professor, Joe McBride, PhD., surveyed the forest on Mt. Davidson in 2013 and concluded that the forest and its bio-diverse understory will thrive for at least another century. His studies have also found higher diversity and more native species in the understory of eucalyptus forests than in native oak woodlands.⁵⁵ Many of the few trees that have died in Mt. Davidson Park were purposely killed by girdling (cutting a ring through the bark of a tree’s trunk). *The Sacramento Bee* reported in 1994 of a local resident getting in trouble with the law for girdling 30 trees in a city park. The article goes on to report that the “city is now duplicating in a modest fashion [these] deadly deeds. ... on Mt. Davidson, the city’s tallest peak, there are plans to chop down 34 (more) eucalyptuses.”⁵⁶

A year later, the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department began developing a Significant Natural Resources Areas Management Plan for conversion of 1/3 of the city’s parks (home to half of the 131,000 trees in San Francisco parks) into botanical gardens with restricted public access. The controversial plan includes concentrated removal of up to 82 percent of the trees within a 10-acre section of the last significant stand of Sutro’s forest on City property in Mt. Davidson Park to eliminate any



Girdled tree in Mt. Davidson Park in 2014. Author’s Collection.

shade on native shrubs. The plan states that the trees are unnatural because they are not native to San Francisco and seeks to remove them to encourage the growth of native shrubs and grasses that need full sunlight.⁵⁷

The creators of Golden Gate Park, the Army at the Presidio, and Adolph Sutro all experimented with planting a variety of native and non-native trees in the sand dunes of San Francisco. The first trees planted in the park were Norway maple, sycamore, Austrian pine, elder, English yew, maritime pine, alder, cottonwood, acacia, blue gum eucalyptus, and several varieties of oak. When most deteriorated in the exposed and sandy conditions, they replanted with alder, elder, Monterey Cypress and several varieties of the eucalyptus. Of these, the eucalyptus was the most successful in quickly establishing the vertical green wall that could block both the wind and city view, growing 18 feet high in just two years.⁵⁸



Aerial view of Mt. Davidson Park in 1948 still showing historic forested property line between Adolph Sutro and Leland Stanford ownership of the summit. Author's Collection.

Environmental Benefits

With global warming, tall mature trees (whether native species or not) have become an indispensable factor in our environment, especially in an urban setting. According to the USDA Urban Forest Report for San Francisco:

Urban Forests help to stave off climate change in two ways: through the absorption and sequestration of carbons, and by reducing the amount of greenhouse gases that are emitted. Trees can store carbon in their heartwood, roots and leaves for decades — even centuries — removing carbon dioxide from our atmosphere and slowing the rate of climate change. Urban trees in the San Francisco are estimated to store 196,000 tons of carbon. These trees also remove an estimated 200 tons of air pollution from the City's atmosphere every year. With all the buildings and vehicles pumping out harmful

greenhouse gases, the trees' ability to purify the air has become more necessary than ever. In San Francisco, the blue gum eucalyptus stores and sequesters the most carbon (approximately 24.4 percent of the total accumulated carbon stored and 26.4 percent of annual rate of carbon sequestered).

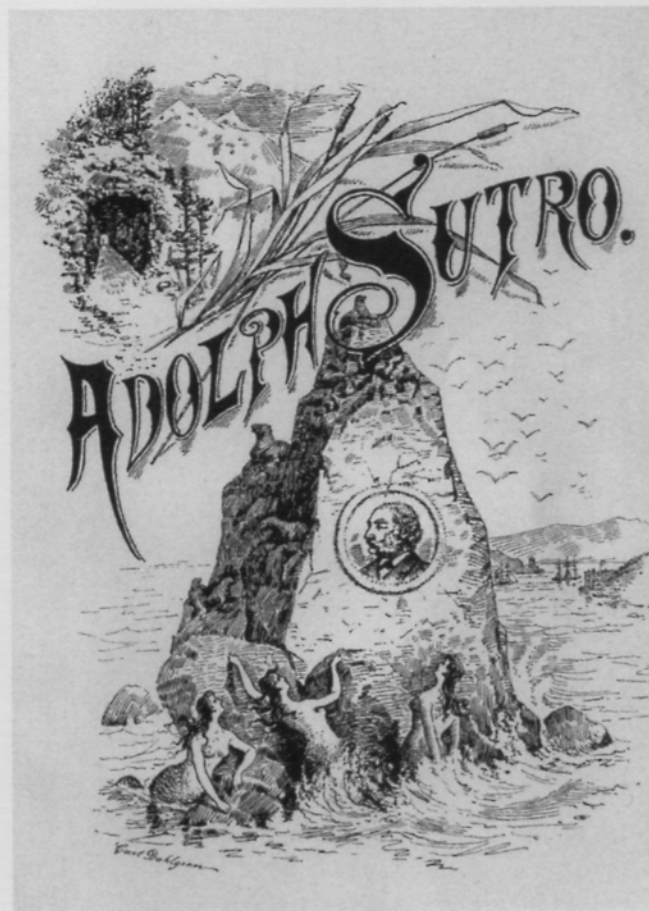
A tree's "net annual oxygen production" varies by the species, size, health and location of the tree. For example, a healthy 32-foot-tree will produce about 260 pounds of oxygen annually. Given that a typical human being will consume 386 pounds of oxygen each year, it would take two medium-sized, healthy trees to supply the amount of oxygen needed for one person over that amount of time. And, according to the USDA Forest Service, the 700,000 trees in San Francisco would need to more than double to provide the oxygen needs of its population of about 826,000.⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

If Sutro had not planted his forest on San Francisco's highest hill, would the Sierra Club have sought to name it for one of its founders? Would the developer A. S. Baldwin have built a trail through the forest Sutro planted on Mt. Davidson as an attraction for the public to help promote the housing he was building on its slopes? Would James Decatur have been inspired to hike through the forest on Baldwin's trail and organize an annual civic event at the summit that would draw as many as 50,000 and continues to this day? Wasn't it that event in 1926 that drew Madie Brown's attention to Mt. Davidson and caused her to seek preservation of the forested hill as a public park? Would the highest hill in one of the densest cities in the United States be covered with houses now instead? What is best for a harmonious and good society – a rational or a romantic landscape?

Sutro's motivations and plans for the unique forest he created in San Francisco — based on his own words and historical documents of the times — demonstrate philanthropic rather than financial motivations. Jared Farmer affirms this in his recent analysis of how these century-old forests have become part of the cultural landscape in California: "Gum trees connect us to a lost era when forward-thinking horticulturists and progressive city planners, for all their faults and excesses, thought holistically about people and nature and labored to make the environment healthier and lovelier. The Golden State would be grayer without its blue-green trees."⁶⁰

Adolph Sutro was a man with a big heart, and he followed it. Sutro Baths Historian John Martini sums it up well: "He was a millionaire populist. ... He had a sense of noblesse oblige. He felt it was the duty of the rich to do something for the working class."⁶¹ While he hoped that his gifts to San Francisco would be preserved, the lack of a funding mechanism for maintaining them has resulted in the loss of most of them. "The remnants of the forest he created remain as the unique and defining characteristic on two of San Francisco's many hills: Mt. Davidson and Mt. Sutro." This forest amenity described in the 1923 *San Francisco Chronicle* article about Mt. Davidson Park, holds even truer today in an ever-growing city:



Pictogram by Carl Dahlgren in 1895 for cover of *Adolph Sutro: A Brief History of a Brilliant Life* by Eugenia Kellogg Holmes. The book connects Sutro's lifelong accomplishments: his building of the Comstock Lode tunnel in Nevada, which led to his creation of the Sutro Heights estate, Sutro Baths, and improved Cliff House restaurant overlooking Seal Rocks at the Pacific Ocean entrance to the Golden Gate. Courtesy of Glenn D. Koch.

"Once on the way you might imagine yourself in the wildest part of California. The woods appear vast and silent. There is no sign of life along the way. And yet you are still in a city of over 600,000 inhabitants and on every side below you are thousands of closely built homes. No other city in the world offers such a contrast."⁶²

Historian Marie Bolton noted the influence of Olmstead in her historical survey of Sutro's forest in Mt. Davidson Park:

... preserved in a state of wilderness (even if not a natural one), it was a place in which the city dweller could commune with nature, thereby regaining a sense of internal peace,



Sutro Baths in foreground, Victorian-era Cliff House to the right, and Sutro Heights on the hill to the left, 1898. Author's Collection.

and more importantly for reformers, helping to maintain the social peace. Mt. Davidson inherited a blend of the preservationist and Olmsteadian traditions. It reflects Olmstead's ideal of a park as a place apart from the urban environment, yet instead of a carefully groomed landscape, it presents a wilder view of nature. In the 1920s and 1930s the cross mounted on Mt. Davidson's summit fits in well as part of the contemplative and spiritual peace visitors were expected to experience there.⁶³

Witold Rybczynski describes a walk through what he considers to be the most significant man-made object in Montreal, a wilderness-like forest created by Olmstead on a hill. He asserts that it is the city's most important cultural artifact: "... rooted in a particular time and place, in the mind of particular

men. What ambition, what effort, what devotion. See! Our fathers did this for us."⁶⁴

I am grateful to Adolph Sutro, "the father of tree planting in California," for his gift and to those who sought to preserve his legacy for the public to enjoy and benefit from a century after he was gone. His forests on Mt. Davidson and Mt. Sutro are precious historic places, as precious as the historic buildings acknowledged as official San Francisco landmarks. The four virtues of public health, prosperity, democratic equality, and social coherence are even more necessary today for fostering a harmonious and healthy city for all San Franciscans.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacquie Proctor has lived on the slopes of Mt. Davidson with her family since 1980. After a career in municipal management positions for several East Bay cities, she is now pursuing her interests in San Francisco history and architecture. Jacquie has written two books: *San Francisco's West of Twin Peaks* and *Bay Area Beauty: The Artistry of Harold G. Stoner, Architect*. She also leads three walking tours as a volunteer for San Francisco City Guides (sfcityguides.org): South of Market Architectural Stroll, Mt. Davidson Hike, and West Side Whimsy.

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Interior of the Sutro Baths. Courtesy of Foundsf.org.



Sutro Baths, 1940s. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

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