

THE CAPITAL

"Preserving Santa Barbara's historic sites of enduring community value"

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FEBRUARY MEETINGS OF INTEREST

PEARL CHASE SOCIETY

Next Board of Directors meeting at the Santa Barbara Carriage and Western Art Museum, 129 Castillo Street, February 5 at 3:30 p.m.

CITY OF SANTA BARBARA

City meetings are broadcast live on City TV channel 18 and streamed live [HERE](#), where they are also archived and viewable on demand.

City Council

Tuesdays at 2 pm at Council Chambers, City Hall. [HERE](#).

Planning Commission

First, second and third Thursdays of the month at 1 pm at Council Chambers, City Hall. [HERE](#). February 5, 12, 19

Historic Landmarks Commission

Every other Wednesday at 1:30 pm at the David Gebhard Public Meeting Room, 630 Garden Street. [HERE](#). February 11, 25

Architectural Board of Review

Alternate Mondays at 3 pm at the David Gebhard Public Meeting Room, 630 Garden Street. [HERE](#). February 2, 17

COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

County Board of Supervisor Meetings and Planning Commission meetings are broadcast live on CSBTV20. They are also streamed live [HERE](#) where they are also archived and viewable on demand.

County Board of Supervisors

Three Tuesdays of the month at 9 a.m. The first and third meetings are held in Santa Barbara in the Board of Supervisors Hearing Room, 105 East Anapamu Street, 4th Floor. The second meeting is (typically) held in Santa Maria at 511 East Lakeside Parkway. February 3 (SB), 10 (SM), 24 (SB)

County Planning Commission

Three Wednesdays of the month at 9 a.m. The first and third meetings are held in Santa Barbara at 123 East Anapamu Street, Room 17, and the second meeting is (typically) held in Santa Maria at 511 East Lakeside Parkway. February 4 (SB), 11 (SM), 25 (SB)

County Historic Landmarks Advisory Commission

Second Monday of the month at 10 a.m. at 123 East Anapamu Street, Room 17 (unless specified otherwise).

Montarioso: Historic Tales from Franceschi House

By Cheri Rae

Like so many wealthy patrons from the East who fell in love with Santa Barbara, philanthropist Alden Freeman, decided to make a big donation to the community. In 1926 he purchased several acres on Mission Ridge where, more than a decade earlier, Italian immigrant and horticulturist Francesco Franceschi had established commercial nursery gardens and built a redwood Craftsman-style home. Newcomer Freeman's intention was to create a city park and community gathering place in honor of Franceschi, who had died three years earlier.

For a variety of later reasons, some not quite understood, all did not go according to plan.

City leaders at the time declined the donation due to the expense of its upkeep. The terms of the donation changed, and in 1931 the city accepted it along with the promise of \$1,500 donated annually for two years from the Riviera Association.

At the time of donation, landscape architect Ralph Stevens proposed a three-pronged plan: 1) To serve as a suitable memorial to Franceschi, 2) to remodel the house to serve as a tea house and luncheon venue, and 3) to create an open-air music pavilion in the formal flower garden. Plans by others included a swimming pool, rock fish pond and an artificial waterfall.

Grand plans fitting an equally grand location; largely unfulfilled.

At the January 14, 2026 Historic Landmarks Commission meeting ([LINK](#)) the latest proposal for demolishing and "re-imagining," Franceschi House and gardens was presented. There was a lot of history about that property



(top) The Craftsman house Franceschi built circa 1905, and (bottom) Freeman, who studied architecture at NYU, revamped into an Italianate-style villa in his honor before donating it to the City in 1931. Credit: Edson Smith Collection, Santa Barbara Public Library.



Want to get involved, or have submissions for The Capital? Email us at PCS@pearlchasesociety.org.

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Newsletter

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Family crest medallion from Florence to honor the Franceschi (Fenzi) family. Courtesy photo.

and the people that has been glossed over and left out. Here is some of it.

An Early Timeline

Theodore Roosevelt was president in 1903 when famed horticulturist Francesco Franceschi (born Emanuele Orazio Fenzi) purchased 40 acres of land he named *Montarioso* ("airy mountain") and built a Craftsman-style redwood house where he lived with his family. The isolated location perched high above the city, reminded him of how huge homes were situated in the hills surrounding his hometown of Florence. In a play on words, historian Kevin Starr referred to Franceschi as "a Gieseppe Verde of plants—cultivated, observed, scientifically described and promoted."

Calvin Coolidge was president when Alden Freeman purchased several acres of the property in 1926. A longtime admirer of Franceschi's horticultural skills in beautifying Santa Barbara and its great estates, he observed, "Santa Barbara residents have failed to realize that Dr. Fenzi was one of the greatest botanists of his time even surpassing Burbank in the estimation of many." He transformed the exterior of the Craftsman house to resemble an Italianate villa, and its interior to become an extravagant meeting place filled with hardwoods and historic architectural features he had imported from the East Coast and Europe.

On Christmas Day 1927, Freeman continued a tradition established by the Franceschi family and held an 8:00 am community breakfast, and Open House that ended with a huge fireworks display at midnight. The gala affair included Italian orchestras and musicians, costumed singers and dancers, and hundreds of community members attended. Special guests included philosopher-historians Will and Ariel Durant and Fr. Augustine from the Mission, who blessed and dedicated the building in honor of St. Francis.



Freeman recycled prized architectural features for the refurbished house. Courtesy photo.

Freeman used the occasion to announce his intention to live in the house and donate it and its gardens to the City of Santa Barbara upon his death.

The *News-Press* reported about the event, "Santa Barbara people who have visited the place have had a pleasurable surprise in viewing the changes which have been made, developing a treasure trove of Colonial and California history as well as opening the way for a development of a botanical garden, where will be found plants from all parts of the world."

The newspaper further described the transformation of the original house and the installation of the medallions, improvements to the outside of the

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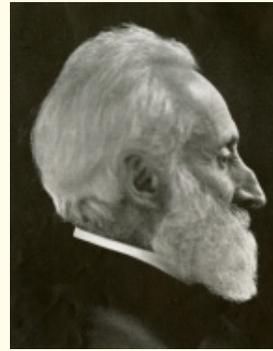
property that Freeman proposed to donate in tribute to Franceschi: *"The house is finished on the exterior with cement plaster, and inscribed seals are used extensively on the walls, three representing colonial events, among them also being the Coat of Arms of New Jersey and other New England states. The Mayflower forms one seal. Another a large common relief, represents the death of General Joseph Warren at Bunker Hill. There are also seals in memory of the Fenzi family, taken from the Fenzi palace in Florence, Italy.*

Later in the article, interior changes were also detailed, giving an interesting glimpse into Freeman's intentions for re-use for the structure: *"In anticipation of presenting the home to the city, Mr. Freeman had the old Fenzi home remodeled to suit the needs of a civic center. On the ground floors are lounging and rest rooms for men and women, The second floor will be used entirely for entertainment, with a large ballroom for dancing and the third floor will house the business offices. In remodeling the house, Freeman had brought from his old family home in East Orange, New Jersey, the interior wood finishing, doors, windows, stained glass and other parts, to incorporate in the rebuilt Fenzi house which he had strengthened with concrete."*

The article offered insights about some of the fixtures: *"On the interiors of the reconstructed house hung much that was historic, reflecting both colonial and Italian history: seven great metal lamps taken from a 17th-century Italian palace, a shrine to St. Francis and a bronze bell inscribed to St. Francis."*

In another contemporaneous article titled "Those Rare Rooms," Freeman's penchant for rare woods was explained: *Freeman had a great love for variety in wood. And so he sought rare California woods with which to trim upper rooms of the house. They are rare woods in the sense that they are not ordinarily used as a commercial product. The trees from which the wood comes present too many difficulties to lend themselves to commercial lumbering. He lined one room with sycamore, one with Monterey cypress and two with gumwood."*

The Characters

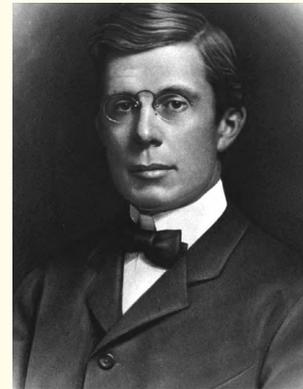


Francesco Francheschi was a wealthy and accomplished banker and botanist in Italy. When he and his family moved to America in 1891, he continued his work as a horticulturist in another Mediterranean climate. He is credited with introducing hundreds of successful species to Santa Barbara, including the historical Italian stone pines

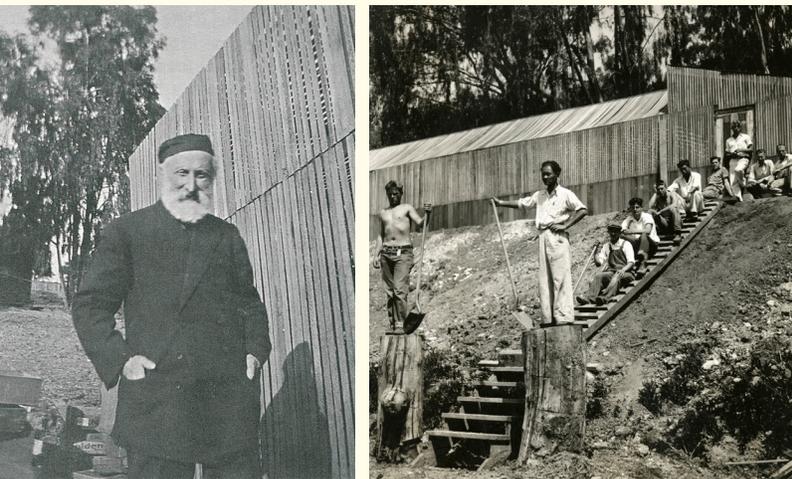
on Anapamu Street. Although he hoped to establish a public garden with his plant collection on his property on Mission Ridge—that he described as "a display of vegetation that has no rival anywhere else"—the City of Santa Barbara was not supportive of the idea.

In 1913, he reclaimed his Fenzi name, returned to Italy and accepted an offer from the Italian government to develop a cash crop in Libya, the new Italian colony in North Africa. He died in Tripoli in 1924. His son Camillo Fenzi had remained in Santa Barbara, lived in the house, and sold it to philanthropist Alden Freeman in 1926.

Alden Freeman was a Mayflower Descendant through his mother, and named for John Alden. Though born into a middle-class family, his father's business knowledge was recognized by fellow Clevelander, William Rockefeller, who hired him as treasurer of several Standard Oil companies and later the first treasurer of the infamous Standard Oil Trust, from which the ultimate Freeman family wealth derived.



Freeman's approach to life was strictly original, a wealthy philanthropist who embraced Socialism, free thinking and a style on his own. He startled polite society in 1909 when—after his friend notable anarchist Emma Goldman was prohibited from speaking by New York police—invited her to a luncheon for the staid New Jersey Society of Mayflower Descendants. He also allowed her to give her undelivered



Franceschi built the lath house for his nursery on the property (Wikicommons photo), later used by students learning from his example. Photos: Wikicommons and Edson Smith collection, Santa Barbara Public Library photo



Students in Peter Riedel's horticulture class held at Franceschi Park, circa 1937. Credit: Edson Smith Collection, Santa Barbara Public Library.



Freeman's Casa Casuarina, circa 2019. Photo: Wikicommons

speech on his own property. His membership in the organization was immediately terminated.

Frequently termed an "eccentric," described as "colorful," and referred to as "peculiar," his penchant for unusual dressing was frequently cited in newspaper and magazine articles. In the popular "I Saw" column in *The Morning Press*, the author described, "Alden K. Freeman in his purple shorts, blue polo shirt, red, white and blue necktie and sandals, wearing a cane in the Barbara hotel."

All this is to say that in the context of the times, Freeman's gay sexual orientation was taboo to discuss, but inferred, instead. Will Durant, noted that his longtime friend and generous benefactor was, "a homosexual, ill at ease in the heterosexual society that gathered about him as the son of a Standard Oil millionaire."

An important postscript to Freeman's story is that in 1930 he moved to Miami Beach and built his new home, the Mission Revival-style *Casa Casuarina*. The castle-like structure was inspired by the Alcazar De Colon, in the Dominican Republic built by the son of Christopher Columbus. At his new home in Miami Beach, commissioned duplicates of the Franceschi House medallions (and three dozen more) The Miami Beach property was later owned by Gianni Versace—where he was famously, tragically gunned down—it is now a boutique hotel and restaurant.

The Struggle to Find a Good Use for the Gift A Teaching Facility. During FDR's administration, in 1934, just four years after the park was donated to the City, it was described in the local press as "a white elephant park site on Mission Ridge." And the house was described as "the half tumbled-down home." Hardly the intention behind the donation or an accurate description of the newly remodeled structure, less than 30 years old.

However, Peter Riedel a local horticulturist who had worked with Franceschi at Montarioso, seized

the opportunity to create a horticultural center on the hillside. He established an intensive course of vocational training for Santa Barbara High School and was hired by the school board to use the park as the site for hands-on training. The house served as classrooms, students built a lath house where they nurtured seedlings, and they tended and improved the grounds and garden while learning a career path.

(Note: Riedel and his wife eventually lived in the house and he conducted Adult Education classes that were especially valuable to post-war veterans who wanted to learn a new trade. In 1948, a caption in the *News-Press* referred to the classrooms held in "the old Francesco Franceschi house"—at that time just 43 years old.)

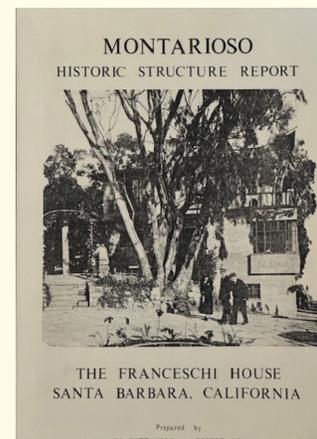
The WPA Orchestra In 1941, the 24 members of the Works Projects Administration's symphony orchestra were allowed to practice in the house and performed series of popular regularly scheduled concerts at local parks. On Tuesday evenings, community members were invited to gather at Franceschi Park to cook their meals in the barbecue pits and enjoy them seated at the picnic tables, before the Symphony Under the Stars rehearsals at 8 p.m.

As an article in the *News-Press* reported, "With the opening of the new season, the orchestra also is opening new headquarters at Franceschi park where the rambling, picturesque residence building has been made into suitable offices and rehearsal rooms. The orchestra also will hold outdoor rehearsals in the afternoon and the public is invited to gather in the attractive little park overlooking the city and harbor to hear them."

Deferred Maintenance, Community Concerns

During the Truman administration, in 1946 a study issued by the Riviera Association reported on conditions at Franceschi Park: "*The City of Santa Barbara should develop this park in accord with plans worked out several years ago. The condition of the park is deplorable. No real effort is being made to maintain it for the use of the public. The drive and the parking area should be paved and the various outlooks developed.*

No finer views of the city and the waterfront can be obtained from any other location. Few citizens know that the park exists. If facilities to enjoy the park were developed, such as outlooks, walks, benches, shade trees, proper barbecue pits and tables, the visitor could be made to realize the views and other advantages to be obtained from living on Mission Ridge.



One of many reports generated by consultants over the years.

This one in 1988.

Courtesy photo

A toilet building also should be put up."

In 1950, Park Superintendent Finlay MacKenzie (for whom MacKenzie Park is named) termed Santa Barbara's "best view park" and proudly announced that the rest rooms had been installed as requested. The *News-Press* article added that in addition to the rest rooms, "the installation of an outdoor kitchen, a barbecue area for a good 150 and lighting for night use, will make Franceschi Park—in MacKenzie's opinion—Santa Barbara's favorite outing spot. With the scattered barbecue pits suitable for family gatherings and the spectacular view across the city to the ocean, MacKenzie also figures this is the ideal place to entertain out-of-town visitors."

Organized Efforts for Improvement

In 1962, during John F. Kennedy's administration, Pearl Chase, acting on behalf of Plans and Planting Committee, requested a study after City officials and the Park Commission recommended the house—referred to in the press as "the old dwelling"—be demolished. With the headline "Franceschi Mansion Seen Usable" reported the *News Press* in December it revealed "it would not be economically sound or necessary to demolish the old Franceschi mansion" [at that time it was 57 years old], adding that a study by a special committee of six individuals in the business trade unanimously agreed "that the building is basically sound," and concluded that "with some repairs and proper maintenance will last for many years."

At that time, the cost to repair the dry rot and termite damage to preserve the house for historical purposes, was estimated at \$40,000. [In today's dollars \$429,300]

Friends of Franceschi Park was formed and the organization regularly raised and donated funds, like \$900 for exterior renovation: removal of vines and painting. Pearl Chase, spearheaded the group; as the *News-Press* reported, "She said that Franceschi Park, once one of the most unusual parks in the country because of its horticultural wealth, has been largely neglected by recent city administrations, especially in planning for its future."

In 1969, the Los Angeles firm of Cornell, Bridgers and Troller was hired to prepare a master plan for Franceschi Park.

In the 1970s, more neglect was reported; in 1982—after the house had been designated a Structure of Merit the year before—local columnist Barney Brantingham observed the graffiti, broken bottle, overgrown weeds and plans to "rehab the old house." He added, "*Off the Beat* wishes residents would treat the park with the respect its former owner would have expected." In 1983, the headline read, "Franceschi Mansion Project Lacks Funds" with a reported price tag of \$600,000 to restore the

83-year-old house.

In the 1990s, preservation efforts intensified and several citizen groups—including the Pearl Chase Society—worked tirelessly raise funds to repair, restore, and save the house from demolition. Those valiant efforts were not rewarded with sufficient donations to overcome the years of neglect and the cumulative effect of termite damage, water intrusion and vandalism.

Proposals for tours, classes, and events to be held at the house to generate funds proved unworkable as neighbors worried about the impact of those plans.

The opposition grew loud and strong:

One neighbor was quoted, "If you restore this house, you will destroy our neighborhood."

The final decision came in 2018, with soaring costs and no way to pay for them. City Council unanimously agreed that the house must come down. That was eight years ago.



Current plans call for removal of these picnic benches at the park. Courtesy Photo

The Inevitable End, but When?

In the Spring issue of *Preservation*, the National Trust for Historic Preservation reported on Franceschi House, noting "The debate over whether to raze the Franceschi House or preserve it has been a longstanding one in Santa Barbara, California." [LINK](#)

Despite the nearly a century of efforts to properly maintain, preserve and protect it, countless hours volunteered by dedicated advocates, and no accounting at all for the amount of taxpayer dollars that has paid for endless staff time and studies by consultants of that house, its ultimate fate is not up for debate anymore. But it's obvious that a final resolution is a long way off, with hefty price tags for demolition and "Re-imagining" that increase by the year.

The collective shrug about the lack of proper stewardship of such a generous gift is just one of the saddest, most costly and least understandable of all Santa Barbara stories.

In 1934, a local columnist wrote, "Some day the full potentialities of the park will be developed and its reputation will bring many visitors." Sadly, his hopeful prediction never came true.

As former president of the Pearl Chase Society, Barbara Lowenthal stated in 2015, "I love that house and I'm sorry that we couldn't save it. Any child who ever walked into that house just got starry-eyed!"