

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

DRAFT

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Mount Tamalpais Mountain Theater

Other names/site number: Sydney B. Cushing Amphitheater, Facility Number D3082001

Name of related multiple property listing:

The National-State Park Cooperative Program and the Civilian Conservation Corps in California State Parks 1933-1942 [DRAFT, pending Keeper approval]

2. Location

Street & number: Mount Tamalpais State Park, 3801 Panoramic Highway

City or town: Mill Valley State: California County: Marin

Not For Publication: Vicinity:

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide ___ local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___ A ___ B ___ C ___ D

<p>_____ Signature of certifying official/Title:</p>	<p>_____ Date</p>
<p>_____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>	

<p>In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>	
<p>_____ Signature of commenting official:</p>	<p>_____ Date</p>
<p>_____ Title : State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>	

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>3</u>	<u> </u>	buildings
<u>1</u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u>1</u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u>2</u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u>7</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

OTHER/Park Rustic

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Stone

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

Mount Tamalpais Mountain Theater is an open-air amphitheater in the north central section of Mount Tamalpais State Park near Mill Valley in Marin County, California. The primary contributing resource (structure) is located near the junction of West Ridgecrest Boulevard and East Ridgecrest, bordering the Marin Municipal Water District. Secondary contributing resources include three outbuildings, a series of trails in a designed landscape (site), and two stone fountains (objects). Designed by landscape architect Emerson Knight and constructed of natural stone in the Park Rustic style by enrollees in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the theater on the southeast slope of Mount Tamalpais accommodates approximately 4,000 people. Mount Tamalpais Mountain Theater retains its integrity and effectively conveys the initial design effect through a near unspoiled historic fabric.

Narrative Description

Mount Tamalpais Mountain Theater (one contributing structure)

Mountain Theater is comprised of forty stone rows set in a terraced gulch above the south and east facing slope of Mount Tamalpais. The stage area is a flat of hard pan soil retained by a stone wall at the eastern extreme of the theater site. Six pedestrian arteries, three vertical rows and

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three horizontal rows, feed the seating area at irregularly spaced intervals adhering to the slope of the hillside. Park Rustic style fencing separates the seating area from the stage. The slope between the seating area and the stage holds a small dug-out production area, sustained by rock and surrounded by two short stone staircases leading to each side of the sound pit. Two large stone retaining walls behind the stage flat create a pathway west (stage left) and separate the theater proper from the continuing slope of the canyon that grades south and east.

Designer Emerson Knight established precise procedural guidelines for landscape foremen responsible for laying the stone seats and joined project leaders and CCC crews in selecting stones of varied size and color. The contrast of stone color against the fluid drapery of the seating along the hillside prevents a rigid continuity of line and nicely supplements Knight's intention of developing a brutish, yet natural scheme that imposes itself gently on the landscape. Knight's color variation has not been compromised and still evokes the desired sense of dappling and varied contours. The stones were laid deeply in the ground for stability and design intent. Knight requested crews excavate several feet below ground level to shore the stone securely and suggest a quality of permanence.

Mountain Theater's stage flat is supported by stone retaining walls at the eastern edge of the theater area. Prior to Emerson Knight's design plans and CCC involvement, the stage area was an uneven trough at the bottom of Rattlesnake Gulch. Several natural drains collected at the stage area and washed further east down the hillside creating deep wash-lines on the hillside and an uneven flat. To develop a stable, flat stage space, Knight and the crews constructed retaining walls and built up the drifting eastern end of the trough area. The extant stage area, a flat dusty hardpan shaped like a teardrop is a character defining feature. Knight's decision to retain the stage area and allow an asymmetrical arrangement were conscious design choices that set in place the later decision to align the stone seat rows in ways that eschewed classical style.

Men's and Women's Restrooms (two contributing buildings)

The restrooms are two stone-sided buildings with flat roofs just south of Mountain Theater. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), in cooperation with the National Park Service (NPS) and the California Division of State Parks, constructed both buildings in late 1937. Similar to other CCC comfort stations and park facility construction funded through Emergency Conservation Work funds, Mountain Theater's stone restrooms are derivations of standard comfort station design plans, often adapted in the field based on availability of local materials and practical design concerns. Many CCC era restroom facilities used stone siding, particularly in the southwest and the west where material was at hand and the design effect suited site choices. At Mountain Theater the stone siding, round corners, and flat roof allow the unimposing buildings to integrate with the grove south of the theater. Emerson Knight suggested subtle changes in the NPS design, advising a lower building that would contribute to the bunker effect suggestive in the buildings' character defining features: the flat-roof, round corners, and stone siding.

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Dressing Rooms and Storage Building (one contributing building)

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), with the help of National Park Service (NPS) planners and designers, and in cooperation with the California Division of State Parks, built the Dressing Rooms and Storage Building in 1939. The Park Rustic facility is a side-gabled building of four parts, accentuated to a circle driveway that passes before it and connects to an access road and the park proper. The CCC utilized both stone and vertical boards as siding, a mixed design element the young agency used on hundreds of comfort stations, administrative buildings, and employee residences. The Dressing Rooms and Storage Building's layout is a character defining feature, unique among CCC design: an ethic that while prizing sighting concerns, also prized efficiency, a quality stunted by the choice to align the building with curve of the driveway, and perhaps a nod at Mountain Theater's sleek mimicry of the nearby hillside.

Trails in Designed Landscape (one contributing site)

A series of informal trails circulate the theater area, connecting the main entrance to the Mountain Theater seating area, Men's and Women's Restrooms, the Dressing Rooms and Storage Building, and the stage area. Three of the region's major trails—Rock Spring, Bootjack, and Easy Grade—conclude at Mountain Theater, with Bootjack and Easy Grade meeting the theater's southeastern edge and Rock Spring joining from the north, through the Marin Municipal Water District. The trails were built by the CCC as part of the designed landscape, among the southern grove. A short access road connects the stage area to the Dressing Rooms and Storage Area, convenes as a circular driveway and continues south to West Ridgecrest Boulevard.

Emerson Knight arranged plant material with great care and regarded landscape features as critical design elements. The designer prized subtlety and the use of native species and surrounded Mountain Theater with both. West of the theater Knight placed Douglas Fir, Coffee Berry, Ceonathus, Tan Oak, and Azalea. At the northeast edge of the theater Manzanita, Chamise, Silk Tassell Bush, and Ceonathus line the aisle and pathways. The vegetation has integrated nicely with the landscape, with rigid coverage north and east of the theater and generally open space south and west. Dotted throughout the seating area are twelve Live Oaks entrenched in rock.

Water Fountains (two contributing objects)

Two stone water fountains, built shortly after completion of the theater, are placed in the southern grove and northwest of the seating area, at the head of Rock Spring trail, respectively.

Alterations and Integrity

Mountain Theater retains its integrity and effectively conveys the initial design effect through a near unspoiled historic fabric. All of Mountain Theater's character defining features—the stone seat rows, the stage area, and the designed landscape—possess high integrity and are in a state of excellent physical condition. Chief among the structure's character defining features are the entrenched stone seating rows and aisles, adhered closely to the hillside. Knight anticipated ground settling—precipitated by an initial re-covering by CCC crews—would mask overt reminders of the excavation required to entrench the large stone rows. Denial of the deep

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exposures is a character defining feature and its presence in the extant structure enhances Mountain Theater's integrity.

Native grasses were planted to cover the stage but failed to root, presumably from use of sets that occupied the space each Mountain Play and its long exposure to sunlight. In 1949 Emerson Knight revisited the theater and the designer noted the failed efforts. "In certain other parts of the theater many attempts have been made to establish groundcover—with difficulty, because of the hot sun, and the freedom with which deer and other wildlife are free to roam the state park."¹ The absence of groundcover does not reduce Mountain Theater's integrity. As a character defining feature, the stage's integrity rests in its natural evocation and placement, conveyed through spatial relationships with the seating area and the vistas west and south of Mountain Theater.

In some cases groupings of native plants integrated with the existing ground coverage as intended by Emerson Knight's design, and in others failed to establish. In certain areas, particularly south of the theater, and critically to the east of the theater, vegetation has expanded into areas the designer did not intend. In the area to the east of the theater, growth impedes view sheds of lower Marin County and San Francisco, the very purpose of the site; California State Parks attempts to routinely reduce vegetation in this area. Knight's aim of establishing natural groundcover around Mountain Theater without detracting from the site's simplicity has been achieved. As a character defining feature, Knight's designed landscape contributes to Mountain Theater's intact integrity.

In 1988 California State Parks constructed a wooden porch area for disabled visitors at the southern end of the theater seating area under a grouping of several oak trees that were left in place. To build the wooden structure some intrusion into the seating rows in that area was necessary. The accessible area has handrails that stand three feet high and extend along a short path lead to the southernmost aisle. Both elements disrupt Emerson Knight's original design intent. The sheer size of the wooden porch, its handrails and rich wood impede the sweeping lines of the seat rows; the material contrasts roughly against the varied stone and the practical necessities required of shoring the structure to the stone have intruded on the texture. The access porch is incompatible with Mountain Theater's design and its removal would leave the site's historic fabric undiminished.

¹ Emerson Knight, "Mountain Theater on Mt. Tamalpais," in *Landscape Architecture* (Vol. XL, No. 1: 5-7).

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE
ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION
POLITICS/GOVERNMENT

Period of Significance

A: 1925-1940

C: 1940

Significant Dates

1925

1934

1940

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Knight, Emerson

Civilian Conservation Corps

National Park Service

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

Mount Tamalpais Mountain Theater is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A for its association with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), an influential New Deal agency created by President Franklin Roosevelt and the United States Congress to combat unprecedented unemployment and develop fledgling state and national park systems, treat public forests, and address field spoilage in agricultural areas. Mountain Theater reflects a unique moment in American history when the forces of art, activism, and design culminated in public policy that helped create a remarkable public space devoted to furthering civic virtue, enhancing cultural awareness, and promoting an environmental consciousness ever linked with outdoor dramatic performance. The period of significance under Criterion A is from 1925, the year the Mountain Play Association hired Emerson Knight to develop plans for a permanent theater, to 1940, the year the theater and its contributing resources were completed. Mountain Theater is also eligible at the local level of significance under Criterion C as an excellent example of CCC Cyclic Amphitheater Design and the New Drama movement. Renowned San Francisco landscape architect Emerson Knight merged classical aesthetics with rustic naturalism in creating a space of utmost simplicity utilizing local materials, skilled CCC veterans, and the site's astounding vistas. Under Criterion C the period of significance is 1940, the year construction was completed. The property meets the requirements of *The National-State Park Cooperative Program and the Civilian Conservation Corps in California State Parks 1933-1942* Multiple Property Submission (Draft)² as a visitor facility clearly associated with the CCC and characteristics of the Park Rustic style including use of native materials, evidence of handcraftsmanship, and planning characteristics such as sensitive siting, cluster organization, conformance with the natural environment, and setting. The property continues to convey its original entertainment function, and retains its original design and layout, construction materials, and landscape elements.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Historic Context

Garnet Holme, John C. Catlin, and Dad O'Rourke, three avid hikers with theatre connections, encountered the Mountain Theater site in 1913 and purportedly declared the exposed Rattlesnake Gulch and its deep vistas perfect for outdoor drama. Joining nature and drama was not a unique idea. In step with national trend, and very much a response to expanding urban spheres and to industrialism generally, Outdoor Theater, or New Drama, drew from two emerging movements at the start of the twentieth century. Natural conservation, gaining gradual momentum throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century in the United States, gained broad support in the new

² The CCC in California State Parks MPS was approved by the California State Historical Resources Commission August 1, 2014 and is pending approval by the Keeper of the National Register.

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century driven in large part by programs initiated by President Theodore Roosevelt and the efforts of private advocacy groups such as the Sierra Club founded by naturalist writer John Muir, Save the Redwoods League, the Alpine Club, and others with common goals. Another influence, rooted deeply in classical Greek drama, was the rise of the communal play. Distinct from both commercial theatre and its sophisticated, brooding correctives, communal plays sought to provide a civic experience that affirmed republican ideals, challenged orthodoxy, and inspired community. Predating cinema, radio, and television, popular stage performance reached mass audiences in America's cities and larger towns. To its critics, the brand reduced theater to a diversion that appeased rather than inspired. Alternatively, advocates of the communal play regarded the internalized, intellectual correctives in the playhouses of Broadway and European capitals too dismissive of audience and place, its introspection and realist staging defusing drama's public charge. With its evocation of democratic heritage and its utilization of place, a nexus of performers, conservationists, hikers, and designers looked to the Greek amphitheater in developing a new theatrical space in a changing America.

The Open-Air Theater movement flourished in California. A small colony of painters, poets, and playwrights built Forest Theater in Carmel. Theater critic and historian Sheldon Cheney called the Carmel theater structurally "unimportant," yet dramatically "one of the most important in the West" due to its experimental approach and nurturing of young talent.³ Bohemian Grove Theater in Marin County, built by the Bohemian Club, attracted widespread attention for its nature plays and minimalist design. In Berkeley, the Hearst Greek Theater heeded the movement's mission in a classic symmetrical structure. From the White Mountains of New Hampshire to the hills of Marin a movement took root, with particular appeal on a growing number of universities such as Vassar College, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the State Normal University, Illinois, later Illinois State University.

Mary Austin, a Carmel playwright and founder of the Forest Theater, described the mood of the time in her desire to "write imaginatively, not only of people, but of the scene, the totality which is called Nature, and that I would give myself intransigently to the quality of experience called Folk, and to the frame of behavior known as Mystical."⁴ Californian artists of the early twentieth century self-consciously understood the region as a place of possibility and potentially a perfected sphere of civilization. California represented a near mythical testing ground for the artistic reinvention of society.⁵ In Carmel, poet George Sterling's artist colony, including James Hopper, Michael Williams, Austin, among others, viewed nature as an integral part of the bohemian mission. In 1909, reflecting the artistic seriousness of the time, a Carmel newspaper published a symposium entitled, "Is California Destined to Become America's Art Center?"⁶ A year later actor and playwright Herbert Heron formed the Forest Theater Society that built a wooden stage and backless benches for 1,000 spectators, somewhat more ambitious than Mary Austin's desire for "a place in the woods where plays by Carmel writers could be read or acted

³ Sheldon Cheney, *The Open-Air Theatre* (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1918), 73.

⁴ Douglas McDermott, Dunbar H. Ogden, Robert Karoly Sarlos, ed., *Theatre West: Image and Impact* (Atlanta, Georgia: Rodopi, 1990), 44.

⁵ Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 230.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

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for the benefit or amusement of the author and their friends.”⁷ The ubiquitous Garnet Holme directed Forest Theater’s first play, a biblical drama, in the summer of 1910.

The Bohemian Club, though playful in purpose, described itself from its redwood encampment as the “flower of the most modern and most recently founded civilization in the world, that of California.” The Bohemian Club, an all male association created in 1872, started the Bohemian Grove Play in 1880. The early mission of the club was part “visionary commonwealth of artists and lovers of art, in part a fraternal ideal: the collective bohemians.”⁸ Early club mythology celebrated “art more than filthy lucre,” embraced pantheism, and Christian and folkloric tradition.⁹ Yet the core of this institutionalized bohemianism included devotion to art and nature balanced against a frolicking male camaraderie. The roots of what came to be a pseudo-bohemianism are evident from the start of the first plays. Each production centered on a constant theme, “the cremation of Care.”¹⁰ The cultured journalists, merchants, and professionals who made up the ranks of the club relished their retreats from urban life. Although the Bohemian Grove Play lacked Carmel’s seriousness, the productions nonetheless adhered to the communal play most basic tenet, the preeminence of place.

Place defined the movement, prompting a mode of drama specific to natural setting and ideally suited to California’s scenic “immensity.”¹¹ Theater historian Dunbar H. Ogden in, *Theatre West: Image and Impact*, calls out three controlling factors that mark the outdoor communal play:

- 1.) The theatrical act is the message. That is, the entire theatrical event, the performance as such (not just the text) in its surroundings, embodies the meaning.
- 2.) The performance event reflects both its time and its people.
- 3.) Members of the audience identify with the reflection of themselves presented in the performance.¹²

The audience, so central to the communal play, dictates the theater’s essential role. Sheldon Cheney parses further in distinguishing between “architectural theaters” and “nature theaters.”¹³ Design focus and dramatic purpose establish the distinction. Architectural theaters pose sharp geometric lines against vivid landscapes, the contrast bringing focus to a feature otherwise lost in the sheer size of a vista. The nature theater attempts to merge lines and landscape, affecting to immerse the structure, however limited, among existing natural forms. Prior to Emerson Knight’s design, began in 1925, Mountain Theater was clearly a nature theater that utilized views, limited sets, and natural topography in production. Manipulated only by the Mountain Play Association’s clearings of the gulch and some trail maintenance, the first fourteen years of production adhered to a very limited notion of Open-Air design. The Mountain Plays during this

⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ William Everson, *Archetype West: The Pacific Coast as a Literary Region* (Berkeley, California: Oyez, 1976), 18.

¹² McDermott, *Theatre West*, 5.

¹³ Cheney, *The Open-Air Theatre*, 10.

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time reflect the simple style; productions such as *Abraham and Isaac* and *Shakuntala*, were uniquely suited to Mountain Theater's crude staging.

Critical to the success of the Mountain Play and the creation of Mountain Theater were hikers. San Franciscans had used rural Marin County as a respite from urban color and chaos since the mid nineteenth century. The Saucelito (sic) Land and Ferry Company established regular crossings to Marin County in 1868 and the North Pacific Coast Railway (1874) stopped near trailheads with a line that ran from Sausalito to Fairfax. The addition of a spur to Mill Valley (1889) and Sidney B. Cushing's Mill Valley and Mt. Tamalpais Scenic Railway (1896) offered city dwellers direct access to day hike escapes and extended visits to the mountain. With the noted exception of the Mill Valley and Mt. Tamalpais Scenic Railway, devoted entirely to attract tourism, Marin's transportation improvements were developed by real estate and lumber interests anxious to attract investors from San Francisco.

A new hiking culture exploded at the turn of the century. Walking groups devoted to developing trail maps and organizing trips sprang up across the San Francisco Bay Area; the Cross-Country Club, Sight-Seers Club, Sierra Club Local Walks Committee, the California Camera Club, Columbia Park Boys' Club, and later the California Alpine club, Berkeley Hiking Club, Tourist Club, and Contra Costa Hills Club, among others, worked closely with prominent conservation organizations such as the Sierra Club and newly formed Tamalpais Conservation Club and Sempervirens Club to preserve access to open space and maintain trails.¹⁴ The mountain became a destination, drawing crowds from all over California, and routinely drawing a dedicated group of San Franciscans, particularly young people who made the short ferry and train ride each weekend to enjoy the exertion and views. Interest reached such a state that by the 1920s the *San Francisco Examiner* included daily forecasts of the weather on Mount Tamalpais. Transportation details and lists of the many groups describe some of the fevered culture, yet historian Lincoln Fairley explains the impossibility of capturing "the high anticipation, the strong community spirit that people felt on their way to the wilderness," singing aboard the ferry boats on their way to Mount Tam.¹⁵

It was not coincidence that the emergence of the Mountain Play and the construction of the Mountain Theater occurred during the period Fairley has called the "The Heyday of Hiking" in northern California.¹⁶ The play's first patrons were drawn almost exclusively from local hiking groups. Caitlin, Holme, and O'Rourke, the MPA's founders, were all regular hikers. For most of the Mountain Play's first three decades attendance and decorum required hiking the mountain's many trails; driving to the theater proper did not happen en masse until after the Second World War. It has been estimated 1,200 hikers climbed the mountain to view the first Mountain Play, *Abraham and Isaac*, on May 4, 1913. Unsurprisingly, in 1925, the Mountain Play Association hired a committed walker, Emerson Knight, to develop plans for Mountain Theater's permanence.

¹⁴ Lincoln Fairley, *Mount Tamalpais: A History* (San Francisco, California: Scotwall Associates, 1987), 79.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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Among the mountain's many devoted hikers was an English expatriate named Garnet Holme. Holme led production from the Mountain Play's 1913 inception until his death in 1929. As chair of the drama department at University of California, Berkeley, Holme attracted student actors and established the Association's loose tradition of using amateurs. In his capacity as Director of Pageants for the National Park Service Holme developed pageant programs and staged theatre productions as he preached the open air theater ethic to an emerging park service. Along with the Mountain Play and the National Park Service pageants, Garnet Holme established the regular production of *Ramona*, a play based on Helen Hunt Jackson's influential novel of the same title, at Ramona Bowl, an outdoor amphitheater in Hemet, California whose site Holme also selected.

From his first encounter with Rattlesnake Gulch in 1913 to his death in 1929, Garnet Holme in many ways defined the Mountain Play's purpose and the site's use. Others had walked through the slopes of Mount Tamalpais before, but it took one of New Drama's standard bearers to establish a play and impart an aesthetic sensibility that Emerson Knight would embrace when he gave permanence to the theater site in the 1930s. Like Knight's later design, Holme's play adaptations adhered fluidly with the natural landscape. Marion Hayes Cain, an actress who worked under Holme and later managed the Mountain Play in the 1960s, recalled Holmes' shrewd use of the physical surroundings and dogged consideration of audience. He directed rehearsals, megaphone in hand, from atop the hill to train the players for the unconventional distance between audience and stage. Holme's adaptations ensured adherence to Franklin Waugh's refrain "to produce in an outdoor theater only such entertainments as can be presented there to better advantage in the indoor theater."¹⁷

The sheer size of the site and audience, the Association routinely assessed the crowds to number around 4,000 in the early years, demanded unique direction. Cain recounted Holme's arrangement of a romantic scene where the actors were instructed to stand some distant apart to convey the emotional conflict explored to distant spectators otherwise unaware of embraced, emoting actors lost in the expanse of Mountain Theatre's backdrop. The raised vantage point diminished the separation and Cain, at first apprehensive of the approach, came to appreciate the interpretation as a style that allowed the entire audience to capture intent. The mix of stage size and scenic backdrop encouraged a sense of play in his arrangements. Just as intimacy demanded separation, the pageantry of some of Holme's adaptations required large numbers of people to rupture the openness of the natural theater. Frequently hundreds of extras would be used to distort the sought whimsy of the physical beauty. Absent the intimacy of interior theaters, the exposed stage cultivated the sense of the mystical that Mary Austin so prized in outdoor theater and that Garnet Holme utilized with great skill.

Production success through the 1920s forced the Association to reconsider the natural state of the theatre. Erosion caused complaints of seating "not too comfortable and very often you'd find yourself sliding down the hill."¹⁸ The MPA commissioned Emerson Knight in 1925 to design

¹⁷ Frank A. Waugh, *Outdoor Theaters: The Design, Construction, and Use of Open-Air Auditoriums* (Boston: Richard C. Badger, 1917), 15.

¹⁸ Carla Ehat and Anne Kent, "Interview with Marion Hayes Cain," (October 17, 1975, transcribed by Marjorie Hoffmann), 17.

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plans for permanent seating. He recalled his first encounter with the theater site in an article several years later, describing an image of “old world theatre carved in part from hills of rock, and adorned with marble, as in Greece.”¹⁹ He had in mind the ancient Greek Theater at Segesta, Italy in northwestern Sicily where Hellenized Elymians cut stone seating into a stunning natural amphitheater above a wide valley and the Mediterranean Sea. The Mountain Theater, possessing dramatic views of the coastal range and San Francisco Bay, shared Segesta’s vivid backdrop yet topographic realities forced Knight to reconsider the value of imposing Segesta’s symmetry on Rattlesnake Gulch’s varied saddles and troughs.

Emerson Knight (1882-1960) was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. His family travelled west several times before finally moving to Los Angeles, California when Knight was nine years old. Knight’s father, a man with varied interests and literary ambitions, struggled to find regular income in California, forcing Knight to leave school at age thirteen to work as a stock boy and later as a salesman for the Crane Plumbing Company. In 1913 he left his job and travelled to Europe on a walking tour of England and Western Europe where he studied life drawing for two months at the Julian Academy in Paris. Returning to southern California in 1916 he set out once again, walking north to Monterey to visit historic sites and study plants and wildlife. He began landscape work in earnest in Santa Barbara, California for gardener Camillo Francheschi Fenzi. The following year Mark Daniels, an established landscape engineer in San Francisco involved with several large housing developments in the Bay Area, put Knight in charge of managing financier John Cheever Cowdin’s estate in Hillsborough, California.

Knight established a landscape architecture practice on Market Street in San Francisco in 1918 and spent the next two years designing gardens and large estate parks in San Francisco and outlying areas. The work differed in style and plan, emitting varied influences from the English meadow to the precise French lawn, yet generally adhered to the practice of clumping natural vegetation rather than row planting, suggestive of later preferences for subtlety.

In *The Architect and Engineer*, Knight outlined four phases of the landscape architect’s development. A first phase devoted to the small garden, a second to the country estate, third the outdoor theater, and finally the natural park.²⁰ The phased development presaged the architect’s own course. Knight’s interest shifted from gardens and estates to the outdoor theater in 1924. He designed a garden theater in businessman Max Cohn’s property in Los Gatos called Woodland Theater followed closely by a comprehensive plan to develop the grounds at Arden Wood in San Francisco that included an outdoor theater, although the plans were never carried out. The busy year continued in collaboration with the firm Requa and Jackson on the design and construction of the Mount Helix Theater near San Diego. Easter Sunrise Services were held at the theater for several years after its completion. The audience face east, in the direction of the rising sun and a 35 foot concrete cross atop the summit of Mount Helix. Mount Helix Theater is a quintessential “architectural” outdoor theater. The structure and seating is made of concrete, material Knight

¹⁹ Emerson Knight, “Mountain Theater on Mt. Tamalpais,” in *Landscape Architecture* Vol. XL, No. 1 (October 1949): 6.

²⁰ Emerson Knight, “Four Phases of Design in Landscape Architecture,” in *The Architect and Engineer* 93, no. 2 (May 1928): 99.

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infrequently used. The dominance of concrete has led Knight's biographer to speculate that the landscape architect's influence on the project was likely limited to the preservation of native vegetation and the introduction of tree screening to manipulate audience focus through view sheds.

Mexico's National Highways Commission hired Knight in 1929 to comment on sites best suited to park lands and historic monuments in conjunction with the developing country's new road system. The start of Knight's fourth phase included varied service and commissions with the Save the Redwoods League, the Monterey City Planning Commission, the California State Parks Commission, and the National Park Service. Engaged in studies for the State Parks Commission, Knight surveyed Point Reyes and evaluated the scenic aspects of the Humboldt-Mattole region and Butano-Gazos Creek region, the latter two sites are now state parks and much of the Point Reyes peninsula survey became Point Reyes National Seashore, a national park. Knight's consultation with the Monterey City Planning Commission influenced preservation policy and shaped development in Old Monterey for generations. He worked on several surveys for the State Parks Commission although none more critical to his career than his survey of Point Lobos (Monterey County) with the Olmsted Brothers company, managed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. The famous contact later helped Knight secure election to fellowship in the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1931. Knight's San Francisco office served as ASLA headquarters for the Pacific West chapter for a decade and he served as associate editor of the association organ *The Architect and Engineer* for eleven years and wrote regularly on landscape design issues.²¹

Early drawings demonstrate Knight's struggle to balance Greek aesthetics against the territory before him. The struggle, however, convinced the designer of the possibility of creating a "massive work of utmost simplicity" and Segesta's symmetry gave way to the ruggedness of Tamalpais.²² The early design eschewed formal lines and marble yet distorted the natural bowl effect of the gulch. The seating area (which ultimately took on the bird's eye appearance of a letter "j" placed upside down) adhered imprecisely to the natural slope of the site to create an orthodox stage round in the center of the amphitheater. But as Knight put it later, "topography required variations."²³ The Mountain Play Association implemented early phases of Knight's design as best as it could through the final years of the 1920s. Playbills of the time presented Knight's design to the audience in hopes of raising money for completion. By 1931, acting on Knight's vision, the MPA had built a terraced wall and one row of stone seating, all the while continuing theatrical productions.

While Emerson Knight immersed himself in the fourth phase of landscape architecture through consultation with various parks and preservation bodies, Franklin Roosevelt signed The Emergency Conservation Work Act of 1933 that empowered the federal government to deploy

²¹ Dean I. Luckhart, "Emerson Knight, Landscape Architect (1882-1960)," in *Eden: Journal of the California Garden and Landscape Society* Vol. 9, no. 2 (Summer 2006), 11.

²² Emerson Knight, "Mountain Theater on Mt. Tamalpais," in *Landscape Architecture* Vol. XL, No. 1 (October 1949): 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

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underworked urban young men to the country's parks, forests, and fields. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the agency designed to carry out the ambitious bill, set in place a lasting park design ethic. In California the influence is widespread. From Diablo stoves near the Oregon border to ramadas on the beaches of southern California, the CCC's flexible yet distinct Park Rustic style etched the state's virgin park infrastructure and left behind a style of subtlety and precision that continues to influence park values.

The Mountain Play Association deeded the theatre site to the state of California in 1933 to harness CCC skill and federal funds. The federal government's response to the deepest economic crisis in the history of the United States unleashed thousands of young men on public lands. In California more than 150 spike camps fed laborers out on fire suppression, road and trail construction, and a variety of rural land management needs that agencies, amidst a worsening depression, could not carry out. CCC Enrollees at Muir Woods Camp, built near the theater site at the western base of Mount Tamalpais in October 1933, cleared fire and hiking trails in Muir Woods National Monument before transfer to Idaho. A group of veteran enrollees arrived to fill the gap and build Mount Tamalpais Camp in April 1934 on the site of Camp Alice Eastwood, an extant and operating campground in Mount Tamalpais State Park. The veteran group included several mechanics, rockmen, and woodsmen, skilled laborers able to carry out complex projects. The experienced enrollees continued vegetation control in Muir Woods and cleared fire breaks and new circulation throughout the park. County residents, a devastating 1929 wildland fire fresh in their minds, appreciated the fuel reduction and saluted the "excellent accomplishments which have reduced the fire hazard" that had threatened life and property three separate instances in the previous twenty years.²⁴

Early in 1934 the National Park Service (NPS) hired Emerson Knight to manage construction of Mountain Theater with NPS landscape superintendent Paul Holloway. Holloway, and later Howard Cox, led an experienced group of CCC enrollees charged with carrying out Knight's plans. The convergence of Knight's design with site realities, coupled with skilled CCC crews, developed what Linda Jewell has labeled "On-Site and Incremental Design." The style would typify many of the CCC's large scale projects, particularly theaters. Jewell outlines a process of "design, construction, observation, and re-design," carried out at Mountain Theater, Papago Park Theater in Arizona, Flagstaff (Sunrise) Theater in Arizona, Red Rocks Theater in Colorado, all projects that utilized CCC manpower and NPS management.²⁵ The approach naturally left detailed plans either moot or markedly changed. In the case of Mountain Theater, Knight's initial vision did indeed change but the construction had the unique circumstance of Knight, hired as a consultant by the National Park Service, working on site with the foreman and crew. This allowed for the adaption Jewell stresses is inherent to CCC builds, yet tinged with a singular design force through Knight's close involvement.

²⁴ *Mill Valley Record*, January 27, 1934, quoted in Lincoln Fairley, *Mount Tamalpais, A History* (San Francisco: Scottwall Associates, 1987), 100.

²⁵ Linda Jewell and Steve Rasmussen Cancian, "Keeping the Boys Busy: Outdoor Theatres of the Great Depression: On-site, Incremental Design Gives Form to the Complex Relationship of Site and Structure," in *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 189.

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The Open-Air Theater, whether architectural or natural, generally insisted on “symmetrical expressions of a theater’s distinct spatial form.”²⁶ Integrated with NPS directives and a ready CCC workforce, the Open-Air design ethic in the 1930s came to mean a process that utilized local materials, resisted rigid classical precedents, and celebrated existing geographic configuration. Definitive features from Knight’s 1925 plan survived even as topography distorted its more geometric intentions. The final product is both “architectural” in its conscious lines and cut stone, yet “natural” in its subtle conformity to land variations. The imposing stone seating is depressed into the ground along terraced rows stretching up the hillside; the rows themselves form to the natural topography, an obvious consequence of Incremental On-Site Design that Knight, through flexibility, use of local material, and access to skilled crews, embellished and thrived under. The process deemed that the natural setting would drive construction and Knight explored the pitches and troughs of the gulch by establishing grade hubs along the upper portions of the seating to ensure conformity to the natural breaks in the landscape. South of the theater the CCC team built two bathrooms and a changing room. The two bathrooms are stone sided buildings that, although not designed by Emerson Knight, benefitted from his keen eye as plans were changed after comments and sketches by Knight subtle alterations to improve visuals on approach.

A particular culture produced Mountain Theater. At a time when many Americans questioned the country’s course, their “relation to the moral wilderness his economic techniques had created,” the outdoor theater movement erupted as a unique form of protest and examination, a convergence of art and natural conservation that wrestled with the uneasy consequences of industrialism in the United States. The movement shadowed national mood that emerged in its most powerful form as early twentieth century Progressive politics and revived again in Franklin Roosevelt’s administration and the policies of the New Deal responded to economic upheaval. Rooted in Greek expressions of community and a devotion to naturalism, the outdoor theater movement took on specific form in California and the west. Poet and philosopher George Santayana in 1911 was struck by California’s “deep and almost religious affection for nature,” and wondered if the natural world served as the region’s “substitute for articulate art and articulate religion.”²⁷

Another poet and philosopher, William Everson, would later argue Santayana’s art and religion were in fact humanity’s substitute for a nature it did not fully comprehend.²⁸ Only California’s frontier consciousness, inundated, as it seemed, with natural splendor, rightly understood a truth that genteel art and religion had merely recast through object, language, and symbol. Open-Air theater placed performance in nature, complicating and perhaps validating aspects of Santayana’s regional diagnosis, as it straddled both pantheism and theatrical norms. Yet Mountain Theater is in part the product of an artistic movement eager to capture nature as a device, quite literally as a backdrop, while prizing those natural aspects that cannot be captured: the panoramic sense that pervades each outdoor production. Nature not substituting, but rather functioning as articulate art

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ George Santayana to Porter Garnett, *The Letters of George Santayana, Book 2 1910-1920*, ed. William G. Holzberger (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 45.

²⁸ William Everson, *Archetype West: The Pacific Coast as a Literary Region* (Berkeley, California: Oyez, 1976), 7.

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and articulate religion through a medium that dramatized the interplay between humanism and naturalism.

Artistic mood notwithstanding, politics created Mountain Theater as much as any cultural force. The extant structure that drapes Rattlesnake Gulch would not have been built without the Emergency Conservation Work Act of 1933, legislation that provided for creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Tree Army" and the National Park Service carried out Emerson Knight's audaciously simple vision of a permanent outdoor theater atop Mount Tamalpais. The Mountain Play Association, through both initiative and trust deeded the theater site to the federal government confident the site's artistic mission would be celebrated and strengthened. The particular culture that produced Mountain Theater began as an artistic engagement with the natural world though only became permanent after politics heeded culture's call to examine the ways in which nature was used. By the 1930s the gap between culture's call and what politics abided narrowed as the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps gave rustic permanence to a site spared and prized not only for its natural beauty, but for the human beauty it inspired through dramatic performance.

Site History

Construction of Mountain Theater began in 1934 after the Mountain Play Association (MPA) deeded its ownership of Rattlesnake Gulch to the State of California intent on securing federal funds and labor resources provided by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).²⁹ The MPA had hired San Francisco landscape architect Emerson Knight in 1925 to develop plans for a permanent structure at the site where the theater group had staged plays since 1913. MPA founders Garnet Holme, Dad O'Rourke, and John Caitlin first saw the theater site while hiking Mount Tamalpais and determined the mild canyon an excellent place for an outdoor theater. Other than routinely clearing the stage area and trails leading to the site, the MPA conducted productions on relatively unchanged ground, which suited the mood and mission of Outdoor Drama and utilized Mountain Theater's stunning views.

Emerson Knight's initial plans called for a classical amphitheater in the Greek tradition. The symmetrical arrangement encircled a relatively round stage area (the later and actual stage flat is a warped oval). The general layout and material choices remained consistent however, and the ultimate shape and design that Knight and CCC crews produced adhered closely, though not rigidly, to the original 1925 plan. The MPA carried out early phases of the Knight plan with limited resources. The troupe laid the first row of stone seating and a terraced wall at the stage footing per Knight's design in 1929. The National Park Service, through its State Parks Division, administered the projects and provided professional design, engineering, and landscape specialists and managers to assist Knight and the CCC crews. The MPA's (with Knight's advisement) decision to place the first seating row in line with the natural sweep of the gulch helped cement the site's future form, further "distorting the geometry of a classical theatre."³⁰

²⁹ The Mountain Play Association formally deeded the theater site to the State of California on April 7, 1936.

³⁰ Linda Jewell, "'Keeping the Boys Busy: Outdoor Theatres of the Great Depression: On-site, Incremental Design Gives Form to the Complex Relationship of Site and Structure,'" in *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscape* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004: 187-214), 203.

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Rooted in the earlier vision of material and row alignment, Knight's scheme also left critical decisions on "exact row alignment, seat widths, seat heights, and the vertical slope to be made by Knight and the foremen."³¹

In 1918 a group of hikers created the Tamalpais Conservation Club to promote hiking and conservation issues on the mountain. Efforts to develop housing and build a highway through popular hiking destinations in 1926 galvanized the group and stressed the need for a sustained effort to conserve Mount Tam's trails, vistas, and water resources. In 1927 Marin County Assemblyman Charles Reindollar pushed a bill that allowed road construction, prevented further real estate development, and challenged the energized conservation groups in the area to raise two-thirds of the money required to purchase the relevant lands to be developed. The reluctant real estate group involved succumbed to local pressure and agreed to sell after the state legislature appropriated \$20,000, along with what was raised privately, to acquire over 530 acres to create Mount Tamalpais State Park in 1928. In 1930 the park became operational and quickly grew in size by gaining gifted lands from William Kent, which included land surrounding the Mountain Play Association managed theater site, and three years later the theater site itself.³²

William Kent, a progressive Republican who served in the United States House of Representatives from 1911 to 1916, owned vast areas of land in Marin County and was a critical force in establishing two of California's earliest large scale nature parks in Muir Woods National Monument (1905) and Mount Tamalpais State Park (1930). Kent was active in the Mountain Play Association, serving as its co-Vice President after the group's founding in 1913. He deeded the theater site to the MPA in 1916 and stipulated the Mountain Play continue on site for another twenty five years. The Congressman insisted naming the spare nature theater Sidney B. Cushing Amphitheater after his friend and partner in the Mount Tamalpais railroad, the owner and operator of the Blithedale Sanitarium and Hotel at the base of the mountain. Kent's efforts prefigured the theater site for protection and its subsequent development. His gifts preserved the last old growth redwood groves in Marin County, caused local water company and governmental authorities to reexamine residential development and water deployment, mobilized conservation and hiking leaders, and helped cultivate the budding outdoor theater movement on Mount Tamalpais.³³

With the theater site in public hands and the National Park Service assuming project control, Knight's plan for construction of the Mountain Theater now needed labor. Franklin Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933 to prevent soil erosion, reduce fire risk, and develop fledgling state and national parks infrastructure. The President did not expect the largely urban cadre of young men with little skilled training, his "Tree Army," to build monuments evocative of ancient Greece. Yet among the spike camps were highly skilled enrollees. Roosevelt wanted the rolls limited to young men, aged 18 to 25, those poised to conduct "simple work, not

³¹ Ibid.

³² Lincoln Fairley, *Mount Tamalpais: A History* (San Francisco: Scotwall Associates, 1987), 185.

³³ Ibid.

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interfering with normal employment.”³⁴ Organized labor feared the new agency would displace free laborers and depress non-relief wages so the President and the Congress went to great lengths persuading union opposition that conservation work would not steal breadwinners from the open market. Holding a fixed age requirement was part of this strategy and the Senate ultimately removed some restrictive language from the bill, particularly fixed wage controls, and established broad control for the President to steer project selection and determine recruitment standards. A month after passage of the Emergency Conservation Work Act the President exercised that control, issuing an Executive Order that relaxed recruitment standards and expanded enrollment to include men over the age of 25 if they were World War I veterans, Native Americans, or “local experienced men.”³⁵ The enrollees sent to Mount Tamalpais spike camp included several “local experienced men”; so experienced that Emerson Knight requested, after observing their work first hand, several enrollees work exclusively on Mountain Theater.

The meticulous laying of stone demanded by Knight’s design required a resourceful crew and thorough supervision. Knight regarded much of 1934 and 1935 wasted by the absence of both of these necessities. The designer had not been on site for much of the first year (1934) and was only formally charged, as a Regional Inspector for the National Park Service, to the project late that year. By 1935 Knight periodically inspected all work related to landscape features and the Mountain Theater.³⁶ The constant influx and subsequent loss of CCC crews frustrated Knight and NPS administrators eager to complete the project. The crews stationed at Mount Tamalpais were intended to perform a variety of tasks throughout the park and region yet the scope of the Mountain Theater required the camp’s full attention. The NPS Project Superintendent lamented the dilution of his resources in a report to his superiors in Washington: “Our principal landscape project, however, is the Mountain Theater. The entire time of the landscape foreman is devoted to its construction.”³⁷ Superintendent Erwin reported steady progress, yet much of the crew’s time had been spent reinforcing and grading the stage area rather than the more nuanced placement of seating rows. Bolstering the stage flat was an important step and required earthmoving equipment. Changing the stage area, all pragmatically agreed, was deemed a useful improvement because of its continued value were project funds to be discontinued.

Following completion of the stage, landscape foreman Paul Holloway and his CCC enrollees began work on the theater seating. The crew first built the lower and midway horizontal aisles, those arteries running north to south, which established datum points for laying the 20 rows in between the two aisles and further established the theater’s adhesion to the site’s topography. Naturally the distance from the two aisles varied from one end to the other, requiring Holloway to vary the depths of the seating terraces along each row. To establish the needed variance

³⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt to Congress, 21 March 1933, in Edgar Nixon, ed., *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Conservation, 1911-1945* (Hyde Park, New York: FDR Library, 1957), 1:143.

³⁵ Neil M. Maher, *Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 82).

³⁶ A.C. Erwin, “Fifth Period Summary Report” presented to the Director, State Park Division, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, 14 October 1935. Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

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Holloway crafted several wooden templates that allowed workers to immerse the seating area as needed with stone and terrace while maintaining a constant vertical elevation that would establish a universal rise from seat to seat. By April 1936, just in time for the Mountain Play, the crew had completed 10 of the lower 20 rows and finished the stage area and its supplementary walls and ramp paths.

Work lagged through much of 1936 and '37 due to Knight and Paul Holloway's growing project commitments elsewhere. The lapse drove Knight to secure permanent skilled enrollees and establish management and design instructions for the site foreman to prevent imprecise work or the frequent stalls that had occurred when senior leadership was not directly engaged with the project. The memorandum Knight wrote for his NPS masters served as a handbook for incoming landscape foremen unfamiliar with his design intent. It stressed particularly the importance of equipment, tools, and materials; the laying of stone; and how to properly transplant native vegetation. An aside on tool use revealed much of Knight's feeling about design. "Abide by a simple procedure," he advised. "Work fundamentally and avoid overloading or complicating with unnecessary equipment or tools."³⁸ Emphasizing subtlety and cultivating a site awareness that reduced human imprint, Knight's orders brought precision to an often unwieldy process.

In March of 1937 Knight requested six enrollees recalled to the Mountain Theater site. John S. Ciseslinsky, William A. Whayne, Arthur P. Roscoe, Thomas H. Riley, Lawrence A. Mustus, and William H. Alves had impressed the meticulous architect. The veteran crew at Knight's disposal had been sent to Alpine Lake Camp just north of Mount Tamalpais with the rest of their company but Knight wanted the skilled rockmen to return and complete the seat laying that had come to a stall. He wanted the entire crew the six men were part of but understanding the bureaucratic efforts involved in redirecting an entire CCC company, Knight settled on the stone workers, "trained and skilled key men who have proven so adaptable to the work."³⁹

By August, notwithstanding the return of trained stone setters, Knight requested that all construction at the site cease until after September 30, the close of the work period. The impetus was both disappointment in some of the seat laying and a desire to focus his small crew's attention on quarrying stone just above the theater site. The new strategy would ensure sufficient amounts of material once work resumed and prevent the crew from attempting to perform the difficult process through the wet season. In a letter to the state's landscape engineer, Dan Hull, Knight emphasized the need for the abrupt shift in effort. The devotion to stone selection centered the crew's efforts on a particular task and also allowed Knight to emphasize the job's critical importance. "In order to confirm to the spirit of the plan for the theatre it is requisite to

³⁸ Emerson Knight, "Instructions for Procedure by Foreman Pertaining to Construction and Transplanting for Correct Interpretation of the Plan," presented to the Mt. Tamalpais S.P. 23 Work Program, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, 17 November 1937. Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

³⁹ Emerson Knight, "Letter to Harry V. Johnston, Administrative Inspector, Northern California," National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, 16 March 1937. Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

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select massive, weathered stones of hard texture and variation in color.”⁴⁰ Critical were stones, intended for seating, with perpendicular two flat surfaces, one the rise and the other the seat-flat. To preserve the effect of “big scale simplicity” Knight stressed the importance of selecting large rock, the bulk of which placed underneath the ground for “firm security and long endurance.”⁴¹

Precise selection contributed to a plan “informal and non-symmetrical in order to become one with the mood of the mountain.”⁴² Knight allowed the mountain, conscious of its form and utilizing its rich quarry, to establish, not merely abide, his own design principles. He adhered to a rigid flexibility that ensured the theater, massive and earthy, would retain a textural modesty. Tapering the seating to the hillside visually softens the material, evoking a pliant quality absent in symmetrical amphitheatres such as Segesta, inspiration for Knight’s initial plan. His trenchant emphasis to vary color selection forbade the stark continuity typical of the classical theater. Subtle color breaks distort straight lines and promote a dappling, or camouflage affect, typically amid intermittent light and under overcast skies. Knight’s request to postpone seat construction and dedicate the crew’s efforts towards stone selection succeeded in providing suitable amounts of the material by the fall, as planned. By 1938 a road had been built to a new rock outcropping which enabled the use of more diesel trucks to haul stone back to the theater site. Knight also procured compressor powered quarry drills that allowed the team to “split the large rock that heretofore we have not been able to handle.”⁴³ In August Knight called the crew’s ability to retrieve stone from the quarry “very good at present.”⁴⁴ Well stocked for the remaining summer period and the subsequent winter work session—Knight estimated 100 good rocks on hand and about 500 for winter use—only lack of enrollees prevented sustained progress. Anticipating the personnel situation would not change soon, Knight initiated plans to develop a small railroad system that would facilitate moving stone from placement near the site to a particular site for entrenchment in the ground.

The meticulous maneuver demanded several trained hands and a deft adherence to Knight’s orders spelled out in instructions for the landscape foreman produced the year before after frustration with some of the seat placement. The primer outlined the importance of using templates before attempting to lay a single stone. A habit of annoyance that Knight aimed to extinguish was the practice of laying stone temporarily to gauge alignment needs. He viewed the “mere experimentation” as unnecessarily time consuming.⁴⁵ Predetermined alignment established by templates and grade lines prevented the repeated rising and setting of extremely

⁴⁰ Emerson Knight, “Instructions for the Procedure by the Foreman Pertaining to Construction and Transplanting for Correct Interpretation of the Plan,” presented to the Mt. Tamalpais S.P. 23 Work Program, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, 17 November 1937. Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Emerson Knight, “Letter to Dan Hull, State Landscape Engineer, California Division of Parks,” 17 August 1937. Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

⁴³ Lawrence B. Taylor, “Letter to William H. Ballard, Inspector, Region IV,” National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, 18 August 1938. Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Knight, “Instructions for Procedure,” 17 November 1937.

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heavy rock pieces. “The foreman must foresee the final effect in advance of a given rock.”⁴⁶ Like precise stone selection, Knight’s insistent stone laying admonitions related to the larger design affect, each stone placement as a “significant unit bearing on the ultimate picture.”⁴⁷ Not a work of “hasty movement,” Knight wanted deliberate, alert foresight and advised the foreman to “view the work frequently from a distance in order, gradually, to achieve unity for the whole.”⁴⁸

Knight’s new system of stone conveyance, comprised of lightweight rails and carts that traversed the aisle above the upper section of the theater and the center aisle, dramatically reduced the time and labor devoted to the movement of material on site. The carts, although sturdy enough to withhold the massive stone pieces, rested on running gear narrow and light enough to move through the terraced rows unencumbered. An intricate pulley system of masts and booms retrieved stone from areas placed adjacent to the theater (by the fall of 1938 much of the surplus stone was placed above, or west, of the theater site for ease of movement) and moved directly for entrenchment in the seating area or to a cart for laying. Removing stone from the rail carts required a mobile gantry, poised above the carts, and a traveler which allowed movement, once hoisted, to a boom for precise placement. The system greatly improved the movement of material and accelerated the pace of construction dramatically.

William Ballard, the NPS regional inspector who worked closely with Project Superintendent Taylor and Knight, reported to the Regional Director in November 1938 on the progress of the previous month, calling the success and subsequent progress “most satisfying.”⁴⁹ Although aspects of several of the new methods had been in place since early in the year, the system was not up and fully operational until October. Knight’s strategic shift to stone removal the previous year coupled with the efficiency wrought by the rail and crane system, accelerated construction immeasurably. Just over a year removed from Knight’s frustrated order to halt work, Ballard proudly reported, “The outlook for intelligent and steady progress in this construction is the brightest that the writer has so far seen.”⁵⁰

Knight’s infrastructure improvements were not the only changes in strategy and planning. His handbook for incoming foremen, written the previous year, had reiterated the importance of templates in the construction process. Stone should not be laid temporarily, Knight reminded. Without assurance the rock seats would lay flush against neighboring stones, and near as possible to established grade lines, Knight’s design effect would not be achieved. Wooden templates formalized the terracing needed to create seating that traced the varied contours of the gulch and ensured the exposed rise and flats of stone would retain some uniformity of height and depth. Knight’s template tenets were generally adhered to, but at some cost of time. Part of the reason the landscape architect devised a new system of stone removal was to provide the

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ William Ballard, “Memorandum to the Regional Director, National Park Service, Region IV,” National Park Service. United States Department of Interior, 4 November 1938. Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

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foreman and crews sustained hours at the more tedious work of stone entrenchment rather than quarry labors. So as material needs were met—much of the quarried stone gathered through the remaining summer of 1937 proved adequate—and the innovative system of moving that material was made a reality, the Mountain Theater’s project leadership sought out a more efficient way to entrench stone in the seating area.

William Ballard suggested an alternative to Knight’s templates. He surmised the placement of “grade hubs” throughout the remaining upper level could achieve much of what Knight sought through the use of templates at the lower level.⁵¹ The hubs established points of reference for the veteran crews who, not only experienced rock men, were now skilled stone layers who understood Knight’s design goals. The templates, Knight came to agree, were superfluous and an unnecessary hindrance to the project. The wooden structures were delicate and a constant nuisance to upkeep, particularly when winds were high. Rather than constructing large templates to place at given points along the seating area, particular hubs were identified that could then serve as visual markers for crews establishing terraces for seat entrenchment. Ballard instructed NPS Engineer Foreman H. McLeod to develop a detailed plan of the theater to include topographical information of the entire hillside.

With a complete survey, Emerson Knight, along with McLeod, began the process of laying out the hubs, simple stakes at given intervals along the upper portion of the theater to guide seat entrenchment. The grade hubs called out the entire physical layout of the upper half of Mountain Theater and delineated seat rows, aisles, and stairways. Opposed to the “cumbersome skeleton-structures” of the template system, Ballard touted the “solidly set” hubs that established desired grades and could be carefully referenced by crews as the seat stones were entrenched.⁵² The grade hubs left a distinct design affect. Whereas the lower section traces the hill’s asymmetrical line neatly, the formality of the wooden templates prevented accentuated line turns, particularly at the point of the wash, the gulch’s lowest point that runs from the north section of the theater south. The upper section seat rows engage the depths of the gulch aggressively, conveying a fluid drapery sense more distinct than the lower section.

The Civilian Conservation Corps completed construction of Mountain Theater’s seating area in the summer of 1939, and crews continued to landscape the site another year. As with the seating area, Knight’s landscape design utilized existing materials and exploited local resources when possible. Careful to develop a feeling of simplicity, Knight emphasized the importance of subtlety in the use of vegetation. Spending great effort softening rigid stone material through technique, he understandably eschewed an overly formal use of plant material and arrangement. In orders to the crew foreman, Knight’s missives on plant handling nearly double those orders on rock selection and placement. This obvious penchant for indigenous material and subtlety of layout is consistent with a career of design tendency and style. From his earliest work on estate management to designing garden theaters, Knight avoided dramatic intervention on the landscape. So much so that he would muse with some satisfaction in 1949, ten years after

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

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finishing Mountain Theater, how much of the natural vegetation had retaken the site. Ground coverage intended to inundate the area between the stage and the seating area failed to take hold due to consistent sun exposure and the mountain's deer population. Among the seating rows, once covered in grass, vegetation returned. "From this gravel spring native grasses and groundcover, the signature of Nature in her bounteous joy."⁵³ The sense that the theater had settled pleased the designer. His imprint muted by natural systems as "all blend to wed together the theater to the mountain, with a touch of delicacy and abandon that man could never attain."

Knight's use of chinquapins behind the stage defines the oval area and hides the paths and retaining wall that bolsters the flat. Groves of oak south of the theater were laced with indigenous species transplanted from local sources, typically just down the canyon from the theater. Arrangement generally strived to frame the theater area with vegetation that did not detract from the natural amphitheater quality of the gulch. Fixed arrangements, through uniform rows or artificial shaping, could distort the bowl effect. Yet some sought sense of isolation, evocative of an allusive mystical quality inherent to outdoor theater design, appealed to Knight. To increase density in the grove south of the site the crews placed Douglas Firs among several varieties of underbrush material, including ceanothus, California laurel, Coffee berry, mahala mat, and Toyon. Iris, Brodiaea, and Delphinium Nudicaule covered the area separating the stage from the seating, although within ten years the coverage failed to take. Above the theater, where equipment and stone had frequently been stored prior to placement, the disturbed ground was returned to native grasses.

CCC crews completed two restroom facilities and a dressing room in the grove south of the theater along with connecting a service road and a small turnabout in front of the dressing room. The two restrooms are stone sided concrete buildings with flat roofs and set low to the ground. Although Emerson Knight did not design the three buildings—"they differ in mood and rhythm from the theater, which lies by itself in the open"—he gave notes to the NPS designers and advised subtle changes to the design of the bathrooms. The pair of comfort stations made of "stout walls of native stone" appealed to Knight however.⁵⁴ He called their alignment in the grove "well placed" and praised the use of local stone as a design element.⁵⁵ Plans for the buildings were submitted and approved in the fall of 1939 and crews finished construction before April the following spring, 1940. In 1949 Emerson Knight revisited Mountain Theater for an article he wrote for *Landscape Engineer*. He noted increased density in the overstory and the return of native grasses among the set rows. Both developments pleased Knight as the effects appeared to enhance the natural entrenchment of the stone rows. Aging and ground settlement distorted the sense of hard stone imposed on manipulated ground. Settlement promoted a quality of ruin set in place; an effect as seemingly natural as the native grasses enveloping the entrenched stone.

⁵³ Emerson Knight, "Mountain Theater on Mt. Tamalpais," in *Landscape Architecture* Vol. XL, No. 1 (October 1949): 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

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The Mountain Play Association continued to stage productions during construction of the Mountain Theater from 1934 to 1940. Dan Toterhoh, who had acted in the troupe under Garnet Holme's direction as a young man, helped manage the play throughout the construction process. The new director brought back some early MPA shows, including *Tamalpa*, a play Totheroh wrote specifically for the Mountain Play in 1923. With the exception of a wartime hiatus 1942-1945, Totheroh remained involved with the play for the next three decades, overseeing production as regular director from 1957 to 1971.

The play's demographics sharply changed after the Second World War. The hiking culture that supported the outdoor theatre troupe for decades became dwarfed by growing numbers of visitors arriving by car, particularly families with young children and school buses bringing over 1,000 kids each spring. Totheroh, flush from the sustained audiences, asked in 1957 upon his formal selection as director whether the troupe would remain "satisfied with a 'poor man's spectacle,'" or would they "start over with big money, big promotion, and festival type production." The MPA dismissed Totheroh's radical suggestions, changes that would come several decades later when the Association incorporated large stages, amplified sound, and widespread promotion campaigns.⁵⁶

The presence of the car on the mountain continued to test park managers into the late 1960s. The period presented another unique challenge to State Parks and Mountain Play Association resources. Sellout crowds continued to arrive each spring to attend the Mountain Play, yet revenues dwindled as San Francisco's bustling counterculture overwhelmed the Mountain Play and made the troupe's informal box office moot. Totheroh paraphrased the rebellious many in an oral history taken many years later, "Why should we pay admission? We can go right around the trail and come into the theatre from above." The influx of large groups of young people each season influenced park operations across the mountain yet rarely disturbed production. Totheroh lamented, "Shows have played to full houses, and yet we have lost money." Although not a welcome shift in demography, the swarms of new theatergoers generally did not detrimentally affect infrastructure. More difficult to manage was the parking problem presented each play. Partnering with Greyhound had relieved some of the stresses on the road and parking system, yet the service could only accommodate a small portion of the large crowds, consistently above 5,000 in number. Most drivers used grass areas and meadows to park until conservationists successfully convinced the Marin Municipal Water District and California State Parks to prevent parking in such areas.

In 1977 the Association appointed Marilyn Smith executive director of the Mountain Play, ushering in a new era of ambition and efficiency. Smith's inaugural budget of \$13,000 ballooned to \$179,000 in 1984. Her energy and devotion to every facet of the play helped secure partnerships with the San Francisco Foundation (which led to a three year grant), the College of Marin Drama Department (which helped provide talented set designers and actors), and various local dignitaries and businesses owners, who aided in fundraising and advancing the Mountain Play's profile in the region. The outreach put the play on a sound economic footing and

⁵⁶ Dan Totheroh, quoted in Fairley, "*Mount Tamalpais, A History*," 116.

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established the kind of production development Totheroh had envisioned twenty years earlier. The Mountain Play flourished in the 1980s, setting record attendance marks with large scale productions of musical classics *Oklahoma*, *The Music Man*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *The Sound of Music*.

The large turnouts diverted State Park resources and presented logistical and artistic difficulties for the Association. Marilyn Smith had instituted a shuttle system that partially reduced the parking problem during the play, yet the large numbers of densely grouped people in an inaccessible area still challenged State Park Rangers required to devote their energies to the theater and ignore other areas in the park. Conservation groups and State Parks authorities worried about the repeated impact on the mountain's natural resources and worked with the MPA to reduce undue damage to the landscape. Many also questioned the MPA's artistic shift. The elaborate sets and popular musicals little resembled the outdoor theater ethic that defined the Mountain Play in its infant stage, although most conceded the recent changes were necessary for the play to survive and thrive as it does to this day.

California State Parks developed a policy in 1988 that limited audience size and restricted the scope of the play's footprint on the mountain. The new guidance sought to accommodate the Mountain Play, protect the natural resources of Mount Tamalpais State Park, and reduce the logistical constraints made on park rangers and staff each season. The state appointed a body of interested individuals drawn from conservation groups and governmental bodies called the Mount Tamalpais State Park Advisory Committee to determine local interests and develop best practices for use of the Mountain Theater. California State Parks accepted the committee's report and developed policy reflecting its determination. The new policy allowed public use of the theater to continue, including the Mountain Play, and set conditions that limited vehicle use and restricted the number of event attendees to 3,750 people. The policy continues to govern event use at Mountain Theater.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ California Department of Parks and Recreation, "Public Operations Category: Cushing Memorial Theater—Mt. Tamalpais State Park, Policy," 23 November 1988.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: California State Department of Parks and Recreation,
Division of Archaeology, History & Museums

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 5 acres

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 37.913386 | Longitude: -122.608145 |
| 2. Latitude: 37.911900 | Longitude: -122.610967 |
| 3. Latitude: 37.911026 | Longitude: -122.609363 |
| 4. Latitude: 37.912340 | Longitude: -122.606930 |

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Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary begins at point (1) in the north central section of Mount Tamalpais State Park at the boundary of California State Parks and the Marin Municipal Water District. The boundary runs northwest along the border distinguishing California State Parks lands from the Marin Municipal Water District to point (2). The boundary line continues southeast, enclosing the Mountain Theater's associated outbuildings at point (3). Heading northeast, the boundary line continues—parallel to the vertices connecting points (1) and (2)—to point (4). The boundary continues along the California State Parks/Marin Municipal Water District border northwest, closing at point (1).

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary encompasses the Mount Tamalpais Mountain Theater and the contributing buildings, structures, and landscape features associated with its designed and constructed landscape.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: John Fraser, State Historian II
organization: California State Parks, Division of Archaeology, History & Museums
street & number: 1416 9th Street, Room 902
city or town: Sacramento state: CA zip code: 95814
e-mail john.fraser@parks.ca.gov
telephone: (916) 653-5607
date: June 2012; Revised 2014

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property:	Mount Tamalpais Mountain Theater
City or Vicinity:	Mill Valley (vicinity)
County:	Marin
State:	CA
Name of Photographer:	John Fraser
Date of Photographs:	August 23, 2014
Location of Original Digital Files:	1416 9 th Street, Sacramento, California 95814

Photo #1 Northwest approach, looking southeast across the seating area of the theater.

Photo #2 Northeast approach, looking southwest across the seating area of the theater.

Photo #3 North approach, looking south across the seating area of the theater.

Photo #4 Lower row of the seating area, looking northwest across the seating area.

Photo #5 Main stage area, looking northwest across the seating area.

Photo #6 Men's Latrine, north and east elevations, looking southwest.

Photo #7 Women's Latrine, south and east elevations, looking northwest.

Photo #8 The Dressing Rooms and Storage Building, east and north elevations, looking south.

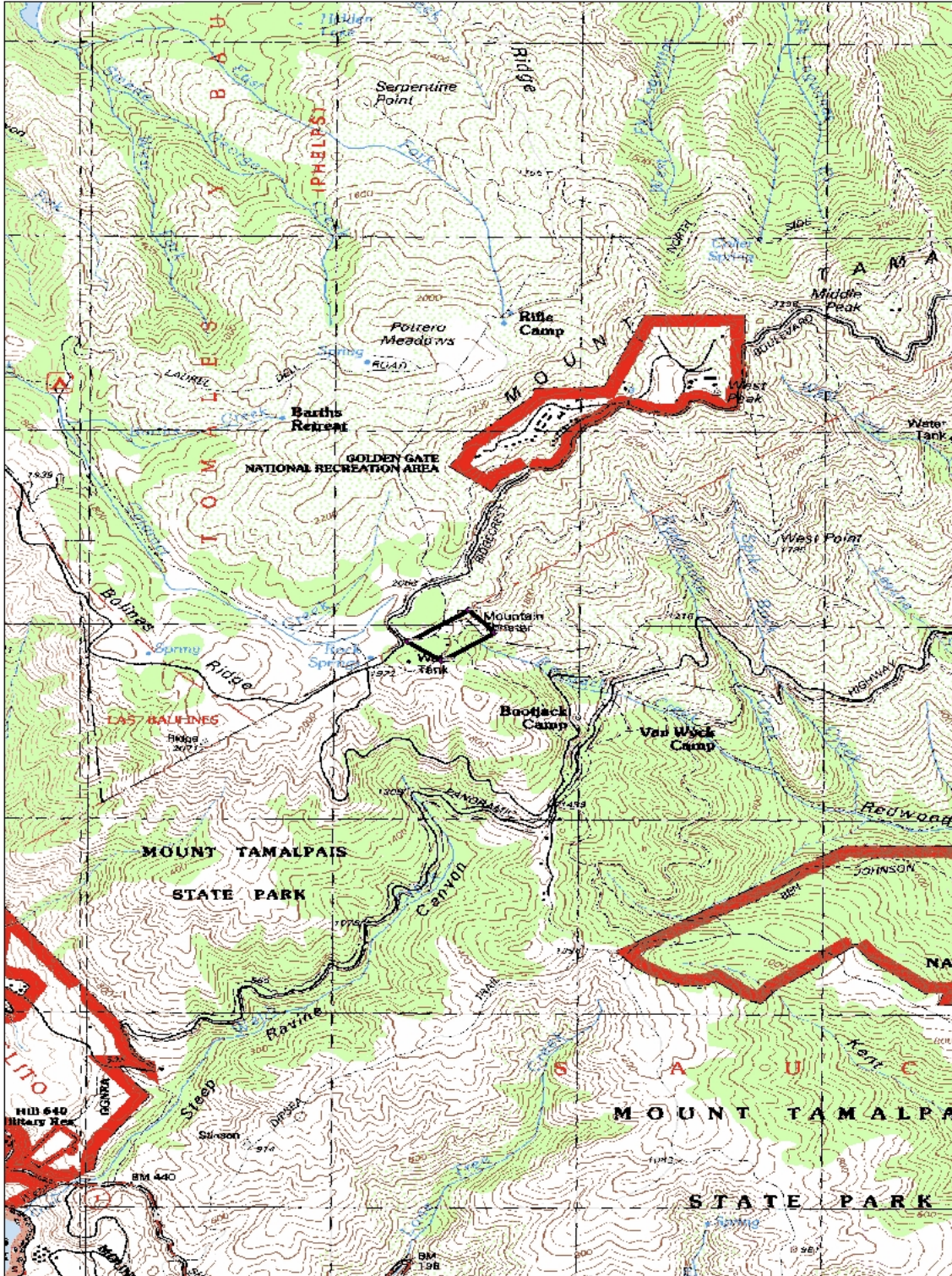
Photo #9 Water Fountain, south and east elevations, looking north.

Photo #10 Water Fountain, west and south elevations, looking northeast.

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Orientation Map

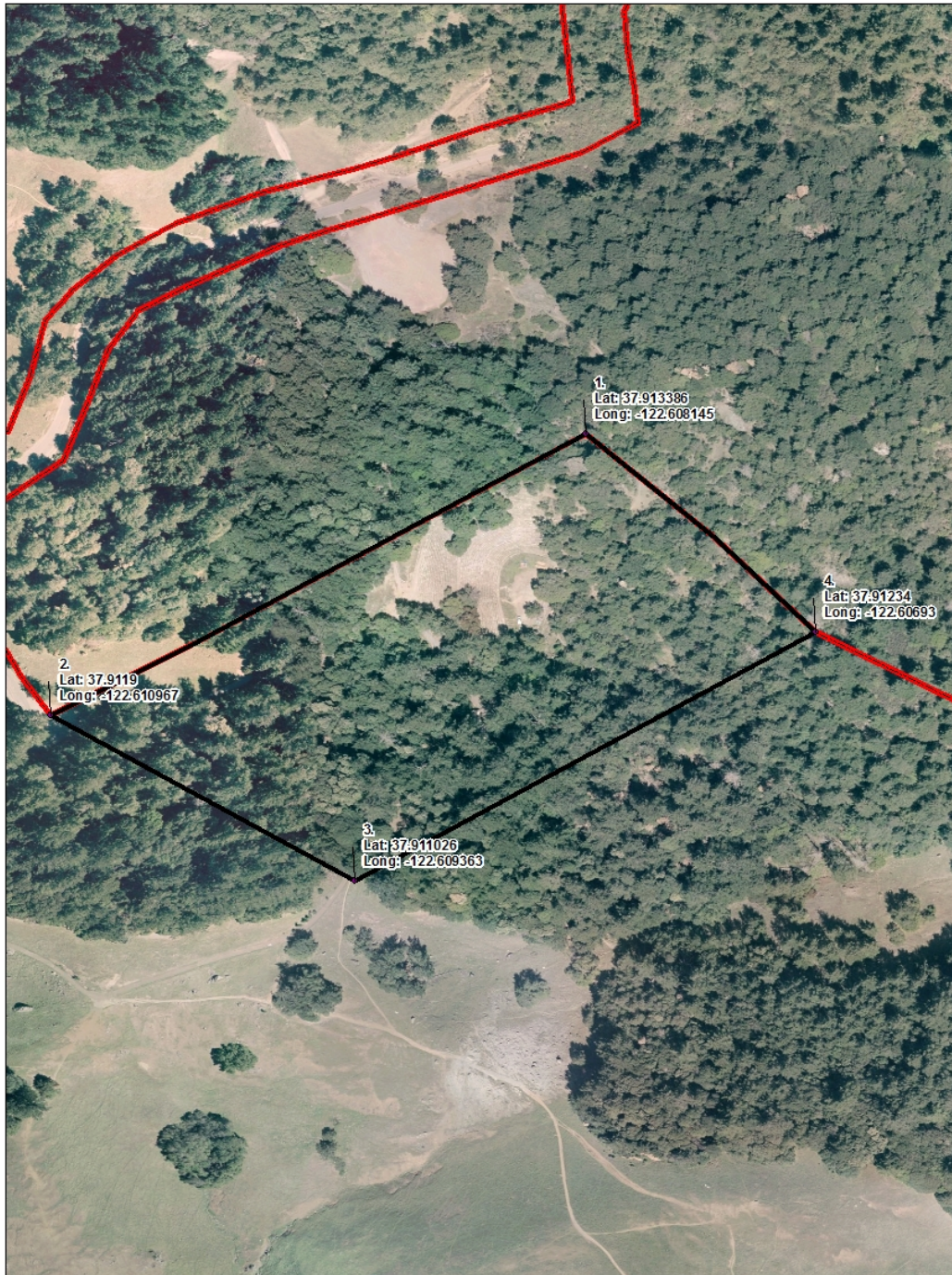


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Location Map

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 37.913386 | Longitude: -122.608145 |
| 2. Latitude: 37.911900 | Longitude: -122.610967 |
| 3. Latitude: 37.911026 | Longitude: -122.609363 |
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Sketch Map/Photo Key

[PENDING]

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Figure 1. Construction circa 1935. Photo courtesy Mountain Play



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Figure 2. Construction circa 1935. Photo courtesy Mountain Play



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Figure 3. Construction circa 1935. Photo courtesy Mountain Play

