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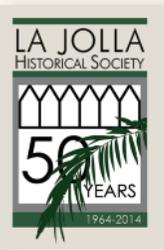
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Lots of Lots: Scripps Ladies Buy La Jolla



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by Molly McLain

Editor's Note: Developments resulting from the Scripps half-sisters' purchase of property along Prospect Street are explored in an exhibit Sept 21 through mid-May at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, jointly sponsored by the Museum and the La Jolla Historical Society; in the following article Molly McLain, author of a soon-to-be-published biography of Ellen Browning Scripps, discusses the early history of the Scripps' land purchases.

Ellen Browning Scripps was nearly 60 years old when she decided to build her first house along Prospect Street in La Jolla. She shared it with her half-sister, Virginia, describing it as an “old maid’s establishment” rather than a home of her own.

She first considered buying property on the bluffs above La Jolla Cove, close to the Green Dragon Colony. Instead, she settled on a largely undeveloped area a few blocks west of the village center. In April 1896, she paid \$800 for lots 4 and 5 in Block 35 of La Jolla Park Subdivision. Railway tracks ran past the property and terminated at the depot located a few blocks away.

Architects Anton Reif and John Stannard drew up plans for a two-story house in a modified Colonial Revival style. Ellen’s brother, William A. Scripps, supervised the builders – Thorpe & Kennedy – while she travelled in Europe. When she returned to La Jolla in 1897, she named the new house “South Moulton Villa” in memory of her childhood home in London.

Over the next decade, Ellen bought adjacent properties in order to develop a large garden and a croquet lawn. In March, 1899, she called on real estate agent Eleanor Mills with a check for \$250 “for the two lots adjoining mine on the north.” In 1903, she bought the remaining six lots in Block 35 for \$3,000; she also acquired surrounding property, including lots 1, 2, and 3 in Block 36 (St. James-by-the-Sea); and lot 19, Block 33 (La Jolla Community Park).

Virginia Scripps began to buy property in 1905 after inheriting a substantial sum of money from her brother, George. She purchased Wisteria Cottage, formerly owned by the Seaman family, for use as a guest house. Between 1906 and 1907, she acquired adjacent lots 13, 14, 15, and 18 in Block 55.

At first, a curving lane called Daisy Row separated Ellen and Virginia’s properties in Blocks 35 and 55. In late 1907, the Scripps sisters received permission from the city to close the old lane and create a new Daisy Row linked to Eads Avenue at Prospect Street.

In early 1908, Virginia bought another guest cottage, The Iris, and relocated it on the ocean side of Wisteria Cottage. At the same time, Gill improved the Wisteria, adding an open porch, a basement, and semi-enclosed loggias along with a cobblestone foundation. Ellen, meanwhile, hired Gill to build “The Bungalow” on the site of the old croquet lawn. South Moulton Villa was flanked by a library on the west (built in 1905) and The Bungalow on the east, both linked to the main house by pergolas.

Horticulturalist Kate Sessions unified the Scripps sisters’ properties



View of Wisteria Cottage and the Scripps Garden taken from the South Moulton Villa, 1919.

through landscape design. She terraced the sloping hillside north of the villa and added a cement walk, lined with rose bushes, leading to the house from the west. Specimen trees included magnolias, palms, and Norfolk Island pines.

The 1915 fire that destroyed the first South Moulton Villa and The Iris did not alter the basic outline of the Scripps properties. Ellen transformed her house into a modernist concrete structure designed by Irving Gill, and replaced the fire-gutted cottage with a chauffeur’s residence and garage. In 1917, Virginia built a second garage, now the La Jolla Historical Society’s Carriage House.

The Scripps’ sisters early development of property along Prospect continues to influence how land and buildings on the village site are used today. Not only has the historic Carriage House at 7846 Eads Ave. been retrofitted for archival storage for LJHS; Virginia Scripps’ Wisteria Cottage at 780 Prospect St., also owned by the Society, is currently undergoing a restoration and rehabilitation to re-open next Spring as exhibit galleries. Ellen Browning’s house is now the site of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego at 700 Prospect St. And, much of the original layout of the Scripps’ land is evidenced today in cobble walls and gardens around the various properties.

Molly McLain is professor of history at University of San Diego