

Eden





Above: The "Musical Stairs" at the Virginia Robinson Gardens, circa 1990s. Photograph courtesy Virginia Robinson Gardens Archive.

Eden

JOURNAL OF THE CALIFORNIA GARDEN & LANDSCAPE HISTORY SOCIETY

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Contents

Preserving History: Award Winning HALS Report Documents The Virginia Robinson Gardens Kelly Comras FASLA, Lisa Gimmy ASLA, and Alison Terry ASLA	4
Beverly Hills' First Grand Estate: The Development of Harry and Virginia Robinson's Gardens Steven Keylon	16
Book Review Janet Gracyk	66
Members In The News Richard Schulhof, Libby Simon	67

Above: By the 1970s, Virginia Robinson had lived in her beloved estate for over sixty years. She is seen here in front of the Pool Pavilion. Photograph courtesy Virginia Robinson Gardens Archive.



PRESERVING HISTORY:

Kelly Comras FASLA, Lisa Gimmy ASLA, and Alison Terry ASLA



AWARD WINNING HALS REPORT DOCUMENTS THE VIRGINIA ROBINSON GARDENS

The pool pavilion seen across the great lawn at The Virginia Robinson Gardens.
Contemporary photograph courtesy Dennis Hill, Content Creation.

VIRGINIA ROBINSON GARDENS

BEVERLY HILLS CALIFORNIA

VICINITY MAP



STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The estate of Harry and Virginia Robinson is highly significant within the history of early twentieth-century landscape design, fitting squarely within the background context of artistic and political influences arising during the country place era. The property holds significance as a garden estate property that evolved during the early development of the City of Beverly Hills. It is also significant as a place where the highly personal vision of its original owners melded botanical experimentation, intellectual curiosity, and an eclectic design aesthetic that served as a stage for engaging with members of the artistic and political elite of Los Angeles for nearly seventy years.

Participants of significance who contributed to the development of the estate include Nathaniel Dryden (architectural designer), Charles Gibbs Adams (landscape architect), Dodd & Richards (architects/engineers), Benjamin Morton Purdy (landscape architect), Morgan "Bill" Evans (landscape architect), several generations of the Boggio and Benedetti families (head gardeners), Charles G. Curtis (interior designer and major donor), the Beverly Hills Nursery, E.O. Orpelt's Evans and Reeves Nursery (Hugh Evans and John Reeves), Paul J. Howard; Nuccio's Nursery; and the Armstrong Nurseries in Southern California; Carl Purdy in Ukiah, California; and the Royal Palm Nursery in Oneco, Florida.

BEVERLY HILLS VICINITY MAP



INTRODUCTION

The Virginia Robinson Gardens is a 6.2-acre historic residence, landscape, and botanical garden. The property was donated to the County of Los Angeles in 1974 and is currently managed by the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation and the Friends of Robinson Gardens. The estate is the subject of a recently-completed Class 1 Historic American Landscape Survey (HALS). Documentation was conducted by a team of professionals, including landscape architects, designers, photographers, and historians, many of whom are members of CGLHS.

The HALS documentation project for The Virginia Robinson Gardens involved an extensive survey of the site's development and historical significance. The team compiled historical hardscape plans, planting plans, site sections, and fountain details. Subsequent research, analysis, and documentation provided the foundation for an

inventory of all existing hardscape, plantings, and site furnishings. The project involved thousands of hours of fieldwork, research, and document preparation, with many professionals generously volunteering their expertise.

Completed in January 2023, the report encompasses detailed plans, photographs, and scholarly analysis, capturing this treasured cultural resource's essence and historical significance. The California Preservation Foundation recently recognized the HALS team effort with a coveted Preservation Design Award for Cultural Resource Studies.

BACKGROUND

The estate of Harry and Virginia Robinson holds significance in the history of early twentieth-century landscape design. Situated within the backdrop of the country-place era, the property showcases the fusion of artistic and political influences that shaped



the era's design aesthetics. Over nearly seventy years, The Virginia Robinson Gardens became a stage where the original owners' vision blended botanical experimentation, intellectual curiosity, and an eclectic design aesthetic. Noteworthy professionals, including Nathaniel Dryden, Charles Gibbs Adams, and Benjamin Morton Purdy, contributed to the estate's development, leaving an indelible mark on its design legacy.

WHAT IS HALS?

HALS, a federal Heritage Documentation Program within the National Park Service, aims to create a permanent, publicly accessible record of significant cultural and designed landscapes across the United States. HALS is a tripartite agreement between the National Park Service (NPS), the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), and the Library of Congress (LOC). From small gardens to national parks and industrial sites, HALS projects document

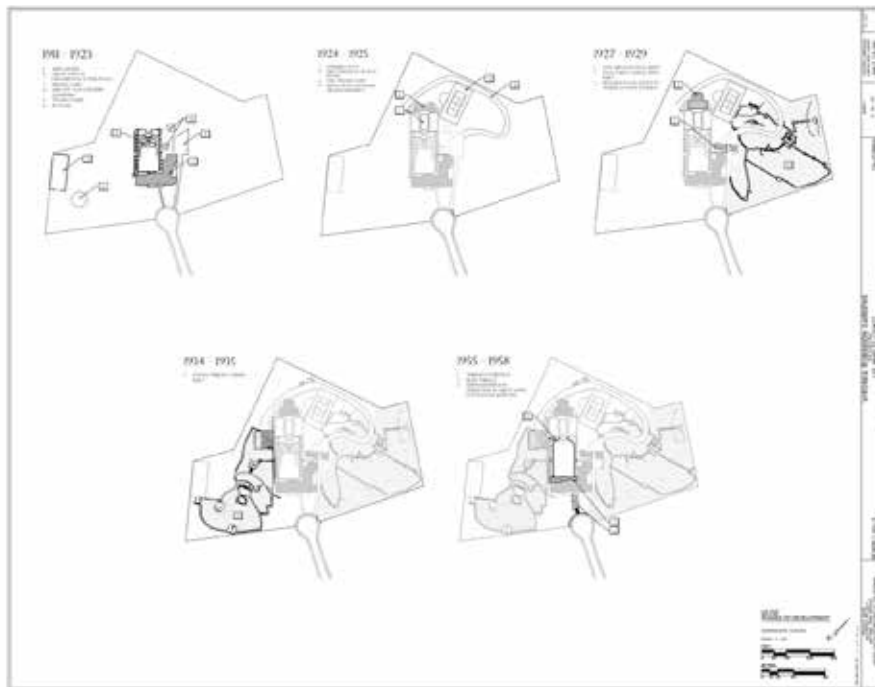
cultural landscapes of various types and styles, both vernacular and designed. The primary objective of the program is to provide a lasting record of landscapes that reflect the diverse development patterns of American culture. Once completed, HALS documentation packages are stored in the Prints and Photographs Division of the LOC, ensuring their preservation and accessibility to the general public. For more information about the HALS program, see: <https://www.nps.gov/hdp/standards/halsguidelines.htm> (Note: Historic American Building Survey (HABS) and Historic American Engineering Survey (HAERS) are companion programs.)

THE TEAM

The HALS documentation team for The Virginia Robinson Gardens consisted of lead coordinators Alison Terry, ASLA HALS Liaison, and Lisa Gimmy, ASLA. In addition to leading the volunteer effort, Terry documented the garden's fountains, prepared site

Opposite: The Elevation of the Pool House and Pool Raised Bond Beam was selected for the title sheet. The font and drawing style evokes the landscape graphics of the 1920s.

Above: This twenty-scale illustrative site plan was created by Alison Terry, using watercolor over a computer-generated base.



sections, and hand watercolored the illustrative site plan. Gimmy worked closely with Terry throughout the three-year process, facilitated all communication with the Friends organization, and was responsible for securing funding from the Friends for the team's landscape historians, Kelly Comras, FASLA, and Steven Keylon, who wrote the historical narrative.

David Dahlke, ASLA, headed up hard-scape documentation and, along with Cal Walsten, ASLA, and Elaine Walsten, ASLA, both former Disney employees, contributed to the overall project organization and specimen tree identification. Nicole Volpe, ASLA, led planting documentation. Linda Endler, ASLA, and Alison Terry logged substantial hours on-site in plant identification and location. Lisa Gimmy and Jin McFarland, ASLA, prepared an exquisite rendering of the historic Pool House and documented the garden's evolution. Baxter Miller, FASLA, and Rogelio Nunez, ASLA, assisted with the



hardscape drawings, and Patrick Hoestery digitized older elevations and merged field measurements and hand drawings to provide accurate details and sections. The Friends generously funded student intern Katie Owens, from Cal Poly Pomona, to assist in site documentation and coordination with the archivist and historians.

Dennis Hill, a photographer with experience documenting HALS, HABS, and HAER sites, provided the large-format photography. Martin Bruinsma, a former Disney artist, painted original watercolors of the gardens. Bruinsma's watercolor sketches capture the feeling of the site and have been used by the Friends for fundraising notecards.

CHALLENGES

Recalling the project's progress, Alison Terry said, "In all seriousness, I feel our biggest challenge was COVID. COVID restrictions and the impositions it put on people's lives greatly reduced their ability to

work on this mostly volunteer project. That is not something that can be summed up as a minor impediment—at the time, it meant that we didn't have enough of a team to make it work, and there was a point where we were about to give up. Plus, we didn't have access to the archives or the garden itself much of the time to do our fieldwork."

Another challenge Terry pointed out was that the team, "vastly underestimated the amount of work we were setting ourselves up to do. As diligent professionals, Lisa and I had in mind an end product of high quality. The amount of fieldwork; harmonization of CAD, In-Design, and Photoshop programs; coordination between the team members and the VRG staff; and the technical knowledge it took to make the project happen was way beyond what we originally thought it would take. However, we are grateful for the support the Friends offered us and for the team's perseverance."

For Steven Keylon and Kelly Comras,

Opposite, top: The planting of the Italian Terrace Garden has changed over the years. This plan depicts existing plantings.

Opposite, bottom: These diagrams show the evolution of the garden during five distinct periods of development. Created by Lisa Gimmy and Steven Keylon.

Above: The terrazzo entry at the Robinson residence. The National Park Service has standards for HABS/HAER/HALS photography: Film continues to be the best way to store visual information about architecture and engineering for the long term. Photographs taken and printed in accordance with the Secretary's Standards are made from large-format, black-and-white film using a view camera. The large-format negative is preferred for two reasons: the longevity of the film and the clarity of the image. The material stability of cut sheet film satisfies the archival requirements for longevity (500 years), while the clarity of the resulting image comes from a high level of resolution not possible in smaller film formats. Photograph courtesy Dennis Hill, Content Creation.



Above: The core group of HALS volunteers poses near Virginia Robinson's mosaic-tiled pool, July 30, 2021. From left are David Dahlke, Cal Walsten, Elaine Walsten, Lisa Gimmy, Alison Terry, and Katie Owens. Photo taken July 30, 2021. Photograph courtesy of VRG/HALS.

Opposite top: This drawing of site sections shows how the structures sit on the hilly topography.

Opposite bottom: Harry and Virginia Robinson kept meticulous records of their early planting. These include receipts and catalogs from nurseries and hundreds of 3x5 typewritten cards documenting every purchase. Courtesy Virginia Robinson Gardens Archives.

who were researching and writing the site's history, a significant challenge was reconciling the accepted narratives, many of which turned out to be wholly untrue or only partially true. Access to materials also proved to be a challenge. The Robinson family's collection of photographs had been scanned, so the research began there. But because the extensive archives had been taken offsite for organization and digitization, they were not initially available. Patty Elias, Friends of Robinson Gardens Archive coordinator, had a wealth of historical knowledge and was instrumental in helping to unravel the story. Elias became a partner in developing a clear timeline and detailed history. Keylon reviewed thousands of documents, including receipts and typewritten 3" x 5" cards documenting each purchase made by the Robinsons, which illuminated how the garden developed over time, and the people who helped shape it.

A few other challenges in preparing the HALS report are worth noting:

- The team began its work with only a primary topographic survey and needed to add many of the hardscape and planting details on-site. These included measuring the locations of large-caliper trees, and noting shrub masses. Cal Walsten and Elaine Walsten took on the task of locating and

counting king palm trees in the Palm Forest, and David Dahlke provided additional hardscape details not on the survey.

- Linda Endler, Alison Terry, and Nicole Volpe completed a full documentation of the shrubs, perennials, and groundcovers in order to fully document the diverse and complicated planting plan.

- Maintaining the connection between fieldwork and final drawings required careful vigilance, especially as team members came and went and changes were made to various planting areas. David, Dahlke, Alison Terry, and Patrick Hoesterey reviewed plans to provide continuity between the fountain drawings, site sections, and the hardscape plans, and Nicole set up a plant nomenclature based on HALS guidelines so that all planting plans were consistent.

- The graphic style of the documentation was designed to reflect the Beaux-Arts aesthetic of the site. The team also wanted the drawings to have a hand-drawn appearance, which proved a difficult challenge to produce in CAD. David Dahlke found a font that allowed him to hand kern the titles to create lettering reflective of the era. Photoshop and CAD colors were tailored toward that aesthetic to include the look of water-colored sketches and an overall plan.

- Telling the story of the Robinson's family history and the evolution of their garden without using copyrighted images was an additional challenge. The team ultimately deleted some photographs, mostly obtained from historic newspapers and magazines, because the use of those images did not meet HALS standards.

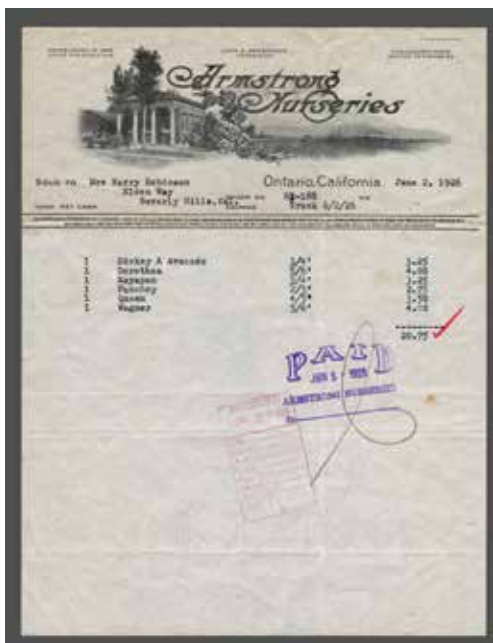
THE RESULTS AND IMPACT

Even when COVID restricted access to the site and wreaked havoc with volunteers' schedules, the core group persevered. Alison Terry spoke about the process, saying, "... once we got momentum mid-way through COVID, we were on a mission to complete what we started, and we fell in love with the gardens along the way. Even after Virginia Robinson Gardens Superintendent Tim Lindsay retired, he reviewed all of our drawings. His horticultural expertise was invaluable. Seeing how appreciative the Friends and VRG staff are for our efforts, and knowing how our documentation summarizes and validates all of Tim's restoration efforts over the past twenty-two years, has made it all worthwhile for us."

The resulting 163-page written report, accompanied by large-format photographs



VIRGINIA ROBINSON GARDENS
 LOS ANGELES COUNTY
 CALIFORNIA
 ARCHITECT: HENRY HALL & ASSOCIATES
 ARCHITECTS
 1215 WEST 10TH STREET
 LOS ANGELES, CALIF.



REASONER BROTHERS
ROYAL PALM NURSERIES
 OREGO, FLORIDA
 (OFFICE OF SHIPMENT)

SHIPPED TO: Mrs. Harry Robinson,
 Beverly Hills, Calif.

DATE RECEIVED: 1/14/27

VIA Express C.O.D.

DATE: 1927 TERMS: CASH CHECKED BY:

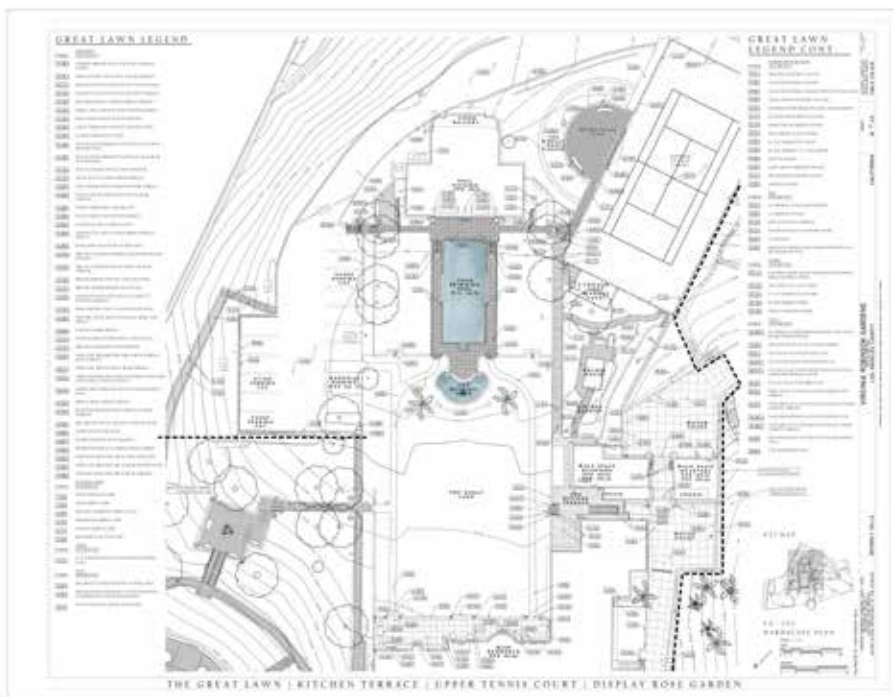
Q. NO.	QTY.	QTY.	NAME OF PLANT	QTY.	UNIT PRICE	TOTAL
1	1		Arundo donax		1.00	1.00
2	1		Chamaecyparis		1.00	1.00
3	1		Juniperus		1.00	1.00
4	1		Podocarpus		1.00	1.00
5	1		Thuja		1.00	1.00
6	1		Yucca		1.00	1.00
7	1		Agave		1.00	1.00
8	1		Phoenix		1.00	1.00
9	1		Palmetto		1.00	1.00
10	1		Dracaena		1.00	1.00
11	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
12	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
13	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
14	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
15	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
16	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
17	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
18	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
19	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
20	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
21	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
22	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
23	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
24	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
25	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
26	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
27	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
28	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
29	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
30	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
31	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
32	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
33	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
34	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
35	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
36	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
37	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
38	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
39	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
40	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
41	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
42	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
43	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
44	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
45	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
46	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
47	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
48	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
49	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
50	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
51	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
52	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
53	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
54	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
55	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
56	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
57	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
58	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
59	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
60	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
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62	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
63	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
64	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
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68	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
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70	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
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72	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
73	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
74	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
75	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
76	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
77	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
78	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
79	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
80	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
81	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
82	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
83	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
84	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
85	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
86	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
87	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
88	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
89	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
90	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
91	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
92	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
93	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
94	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00
95	1		Philodendron		1.00	1.00
96	1		Dieffenbachia		1.00	1.00
97	1		Peperomia		1.00	1.00
98	1		Polka Dot Plant		1.00	1.00
99	1		Spider Plant		1.00	1.00
100	1		Wandering Jew		1.00	1.00

REASONER BROTHERS
 1234 5th Street
 OREGO, FLORIDA

ESTABLISHED 1887

Robinson Estate
 Beverly Hills

1 - Anthurium myosotisiflora
 Carl Purdy - 11/14/29
 Etich,



Top: Artist Martin Bruinsma created interpretive watercolor drawings of special views of the garden.

Bottom: This sheet documents the hardscape and details of the swimming pool area of the garden.

and forty-three sheets of drawings, provides an invaluable resource for understanding the evolution of the gardens.

The HALS report holds immense importance for The Virginia Robinson Gardens' operating staff, Friends of Robinson Gardens, and the surrounding community. Its impact can be seen in various aspects:

Preservation and Education: The report offers well-researched historical information that will be incorporated into docent

training, educational programs, and interpretive initiatives. This resource is particularly valuable to schoolchildren and the general public, fostering a deeper understanding of the site's cultural and historical significance.

Community Engagement: The report enhances community awareness and appreciation of The Virginia Robinson Gardens. Demonstrating the resource's significance and accurate interpretation strengthens the case for preservation and serves as a guiding document for resource protection and management decisions.

Research and Design: The report is a valuable asset for the Southern California landscape preservation community, researchers, and design professionals. The project illustrates the collective will of a passionate group of professionals to highlight and preserve a valuable resource in Los Angeles. It has also cemented a core group of dedicated professionals who recognize the importance of documenting and preserving precious and fragile landscapes for future generations. Its inclusion in the LOC provides access to an extensive record for preservation and design research purposes.

Museum Status: The report supports the Friends of Robinson Gardens' pursuit of museum status and represents timely documentation of the retiring superintendent Tim Lindsay's trove of institutional knowledge acquired over his tenure of twenty-two years. The HALS documentation process also coincided with the recent reorganization and digitization of its extensive archives, led by Friends of Robinson Gardens Archives



Left: Dennis Hill's photograph captures the majesty of the King Palm Forest. Photograph courtesy Dennis Hill, Content Creation.

coordinator Patty Elias. This achievement will open avenues for the funding of restoration and rehabilitation projects, further enhancing the public's access to the site.

Project co-lead Lisa Gimmy noted, "There is something magical about an effort like this, where professionals come together out of a shared love for a place and for landscape architecture as a discipline. I think that really comes through in the documents." Co-Lead Alison Terry agreed, saying, "I feel that I gained some lifelong friends along the way, too. And we could not have done our HALS documentation to such a high level without the ongoing technical support and encouragement of Chris Stevens, Senior Landscape Architect, HALS, NPS."

Completing the HALS report for The Virginia Robinson Gardens represents a monumental achievement made possible through the dedication and expertise of a diverse group of professionals. The report's comprehensive documentation and historical

research lay the foundation for enhanced educational programs, interpretive opportunities, and ongoing preservation efforts. By safeguarding the history and importance of The Virginia Robinson Gardens, the project ensures that future generations will appreciate and learn from this beautiful cultural gem in the heart of Beverly Hills.

HALS TEAM MEMBERS

Alison Terry, ASLA – Southern California Chapter, ASLA HALS Liaison/Terry Design, Inc. - Project Co-Lead/Landscape Architect

Lisa Gimmy, ASLA – Lisa Gimmy Landscape Architecture - Project Co-Lead/Landscape Architect

Kelly Comras, FASLA – Kelly Comras Landscape Architecture – Architectural Historian

Steven Keylon – Architectural Historian

David Dahlke, ASLA – Landscape Architect

Dennis Hill – Content Creation – Photographer

Tim Lindsay – Retired Superintendent,

Virginia Robinson Gardens

Betty Goldstein – Former President, Friends of Robinson Gardens

Patty Elias – Friends of Robinson Gardens Archives coordinator

Nicole Volpe, ASLA – VERTiCA Landscape Architecture Inc. – Landscape Architect

Linda Endler, ASLA – Linda Endler Design – Landscape Architect

Cal Walsten, ASLA – GDI Landscape Architecture, Inc. – Landscape Architect

Elaine Walsten, ASLA – GDI Landscape Architecture, Inc. – Landscape Architect

Martin Bruinsma – Artist

Jin McFarland – Lisa Gimmy Landscape Architecture – Landscape Designer

Patrick Hoesterey – CAD Drafter

Rogelio Nunez – BMLA, Inc. – Landscape Designer

Katie Owens – California Polytechnic Institute, Pomona - Landscape Architectural Intern

Robert Anderson – Author, *Beverly Hills: The First 100 Years*

Kathleen Campbell – Docent, Virginia Robinson Gardens

Libby Simon – Libby Simon Landscape Design – Landscape Designer – VRG Chronology

Janet Gracyk, ASLA – Landscape Architect – HALS Training

Greg Applegate – Arbogate Consulting, Inc. – Arborist

Mitchell Lam – Dakeuna Consultants – Landscape Designer



**BEVERLY HILLS' FIRST GRAND ESTATE:
The Development of Harry and Virginia
Robinson's Gardens**

STEVEN KEYLON

The estate of Harry Winchester Robinson and his wife Virginia was built in 1911 and is considered the first residence in Beverly Hills. Photograph circa 1980s, courtesy Virginia Robinson Gardens Archive (henceforth, VRGA).





IN 1911,

when Harry and Virginia Robinson took possession of their newly built Italian-style bungalow, it was perched on top of a bare knoll that overlooked barren hills and dusty flats. Beverly Hills had only been established a few years earlier, in 1906, and was laid out by landscape architect Wilbur David Cook. The Robinson's relatively modest Mediterranean-inspired home would undoubtedly be overshadowed by the increasingly larger estates that soon sprang up around it, but this suited the Robinsons just fine. Being pioneers and individualists, the Robinsons had no standard of magnificence with which to compare their home, as they had no neighbors at first.

Consequently, the house and exquisite gardens the couple created were on a human scale for the enjoyment of their many visitors and not intimidating monuments to their great wealth. They soon began educating themselves on plants, and their study and collection of them would be a focus of their extensive travels around the world.

Harry Robinson was the heir to the J.W. Robinson department stores. Young, wealthy, and unconventional, Harry and Virginia were imbued with the pioneer spirit. Though they were born in the Belle Epoque, this forward-thinking and progressive couple had more in common with the free-spirited Jazz Age. Their extensive international travels ensured that the Robinsons embodied a sophisticated European way of life in their entertaining, and the extraordinary garden they created together had a global sensibility.

Over the next five decades, the garden underwent multiple distinct phases of development, each characterized by varying degrees of intensity. Following the passing of her husband in 1932, during the depths of the Great Depression, Virginia persisted in her efforts to craft and expand the garden as a heartfelt homage to her late husband. This article aims to chronicle the stages of construction and elucidate the circumstances under which they were brought into being.

Top left: Virginia Robinson and one of her dogs in front of the house circa 1915. Rose standards line the path to the front door. Courtesy VRGA.

Top right: After mourning the death of her husband Harry in 1932, Virginia would pivot to become one of the Southland's most successful hostesses. She is seen here in her garden circa 1935. Courtesy VRGA.

Bottom left: Virginia, circa 1961, with one of her beloved poodles. Courtesy VRGA.

Bottom right: Virginia stands near the wisteria-covered portal of her residence circa 1970. Courtesy VRGA.



VIRGINIA AND HARRY ROBINSON

Though she was diminutive in stature, Virginia Robinson was large in spirit. Light-hearted, athletic, and fearless, she was described as “a petite, vivacious person with a charming soft voice and immeasurable understanding. She was one of the very first of our society matrons to bob her hair, but because her lovely long hair was so ‘bothersome.’”¹ This maverick spirit showed itself in many ways. She later revealed to a writer, “I never liked weddings and refused to wear a wedding veil. My gown was a cream-colored one the dressmaker made for me with a crumpled-out skirt.”²

Composer Les Baxter, a good friend for the last thirty years of her life, later recalled that Virginia “was always on top of the conversation.” She was typically up to date, never gave the impression of being old, and always had a “marvelous humor.” He recalled that she loved to go to Robinson’s and to be recognized. She was confident in her good taste, and Baxter revealed, “She was fiery and negative comments towards her, or her possessions would cause her to lose her temper. Mrs.

Top left: Portrait of Virginia Robinson, circa 1902. Courtesy VRGA.

Top right: Portrait of Harry Winchester Robinson, circa 1915. Courtesy VRGA.

Opposite left: A smiling and laughing Virginia greeting guests at one of her famous parties circa 1962. Courtesy VRGA.

Opposite right: Virginia Robinson, circa 1902. Courtesy VRGA.



Robinson loved flattery. Everyone catered to her.”³

Her last majordomo, Ivo Hadjiev, said of her, “Her life was one straight line. Very constant was her life. Probably that was her nature and character. She was very precise. We know when she liked something, and we know when she didn’t like something. Ohhhh, she was very precise.”⁴

However, in her garden, she expressed herself differently. Baxter, who considered himself her “horticultural friend,” observed that there was “no planning or form in her very personal garden. She liked a wild, sloppy garden.” He also said that she would plant anything anyone gave her, and she often reciprocated with plants from her garden. He believed that her “activity in the garden restored her health. Gardens were the secret to her longevity.” He considered her “the most knowledgeable gardener in Los Angeles.”⁵

Virginia invited esteemed horticulturist, landscape designer, and nursery owner Paul J. Howard for luncheon one Saturday in June of 1961. Writing to thank her for the “delightful” luncheon in her “charming

garden,” and sending her some hard-to-find roses in appreciation, Howard said,

Sitting out under the trees, I felt as though I was dining Alfresco in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris. A very tasty Martini, a delightful bottle of wine, and Eggs Benedict...all were ‘par excellence’! And it was most pleasant to reminisce about roses and other plants. Your tropical labyrinth is breathtaking in its beauty. I hope these roses will flower in your lovely garden and give you some added friends for your already delightful rose collection. It was a great pleasure indeed to be entertained by such a distinguished nonprofessional as yourself...so skilled in the world of horticulture.⁶

VIRGINIA (1877-1977)

Virginia Catherine Dryden was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 21, 1877. Her father, Nathaniel Dryden (1849-1924), was a self-taught architectural designer and building contractor. In 1887, the Dryden family, including Virginia’s mother Helen



Above: Though Harry and Virginia Robinson were from the Belle Epoque, they had more in common with the free-spirited Jazz Age. Virginia is seen standing before their chauffeur-driven 1929 Cadillac Town Car. The couple also owned several Duesenbergs during this period. Courtesy VRGA.

Opposite top: When the Robinson's house was built in 1911, it was alone at the top of a barren hill surrounded by dusty flats. Courtesy VRGA.

Opposite bottom: The first iteration of the J.W. Robinson department stores was the Boston Dry Goods Store, which Harry's father J.W. Robinson opened in Los Angeles. Courtesy VRGA.

(“Nellie,” 1857-1937) and her younger sister Ada (1879-1976), decided to move to Los Angeles at the urging of Helen's brother, the dynamic Leslie Brand, who was known as the “father of Glendale.”

In Southern California, Nathaniel Dryden designed iconic structures such as “Ard Eevin,” a West Indies plantation-style house, and “El Miradero,” a Spanish-style gem that became the renowned Brand Library & Art Center. He also designed the O. T. Johnson commercial building in downtown Los Angeles. Nathaniel's architectural prowess flourished, as did the prosperity of the Dryden family.

HARRY (1878-1932)

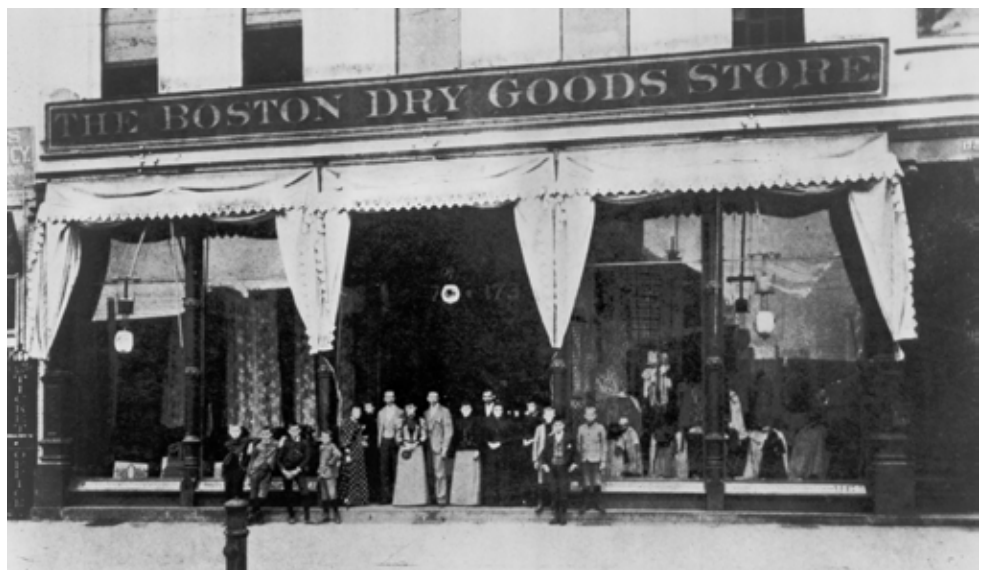
Harry Winchester Robinson was born in Waltham, Massachusetts on October 22, 1878. As a member of the fourth generation of a mercantile dynasty, he inherited a legacy of trade and business excellence. His grandfather, Harry Winchester (H. W.) Robinson expanded the family's business into an emporium specializing in imported carpets, tapestries, and dry goods in Brockton, Massachusetts.

In 1882, when he was four, Harry's



family moved to Los Angeles, where his father, Joseph Winchester (J. W.) Robinson established the Boston Dry Goods store in downtown Los Angeles, a “carriage trade” establishment evoking his New England heritage of honest and ethical trade. The store quickly thrived due to the exponential population growth of the city and the booming economy. In June 1887, the store moved to a more prominent location on Spring Street. With eighty employees, the magnificent new store was heralded as the city’s most extensive dry goods establishment.

Tragically, J. W. Robinson passed away in 1891 at the age of forty-five. Harry was just twelve years old at the time of his father’s death. Julia Sprague Robinson, Harry’s mother, became the company’s majority shareholder and played a significant role in



In 1915, the J.W. Robinson Company opened a new, block-long headquarters on Seventh Street between Grand and Hope. The store offered elegant shopping on its seven floors, from the white-gloved footman at the Seventh Street entrance to the high-rise view from the rooftop café. The store was designed by architects Frederick Noonan and William Richards (of Dodd & Richards). Courtesy VRGA.

running the business.⁷ Harry commenced his education and training to eventually take over the store's management. The store was renamed the "J. W. Robinson Company" in honor of its late founder.

Given the prominence of both their families, it was natural that Virginia and Harry would cross paths. As teenagers, they were frequently listed in society columns attending the same events. Harry was described then as a "charmingly simple and likable young fellow."⁸ By 1903, Harry and Virginia's friendship blossomed into courtship. After just six days of engagement, they were married in November of that year at her parent's home. The *Los Angeles Times* reported Virginia had "a long list of admirers left in [the] lurch by [their] unexpected marriage." The article continued, "never was there a girl here with so many adorers. All seemingly unconscious, she fairly breathed in an atmosphere of rapturous devotion."⁹

The couple's honeymoon on the East Coast was followed by extended trips to Europe, Egypt, India, China, Japan, South America, and more. Their home would become a testament to their adventures, adorned with mementos, photo albums, guidebooks, and travel souvenirs from their journeys.







1911

PHASE ONE: 1911

In September 1909, Harry and Virginia began a trip overseas that would last a little over a year.¹⁰ After their departure from China in October 1910, the *Los Angeles Graphic* reported on November 26 that “Mr. and Mrs. Harry Robinson have returned from their trip around the world and are now at the home of Mrs. Robinson’s mother, Mrs. Nathaniel Dryden in Manhattan Place. They were away from the city about fourteen months.”¹¹

On their return, many of their friends told them that the Los Angeles Country Club was moving from its old location at Pico and Western to the newly developed community of Beverly Hills. Curious about it, they set out to find the golf course, still under construction, on the evening of January 11, 1911. Virginia later told a reporter, “We never found the club, but we found ourselves on a slight hill with a lovely view of rippling wheat fields and the mountains. A full moon was shining down, and Harry said, ‘This is where we are going to live.’”¹² That was reportedly at 1:30 a.m., and “By ten that morning, we had bought it. We liked to do everything quickly.”¹³

Though seemingly impulsive, the decision wasn’t without merit. Virginia’s uncle, Leslie Brand, frequently engaged in real estate transactions alongside the affluent

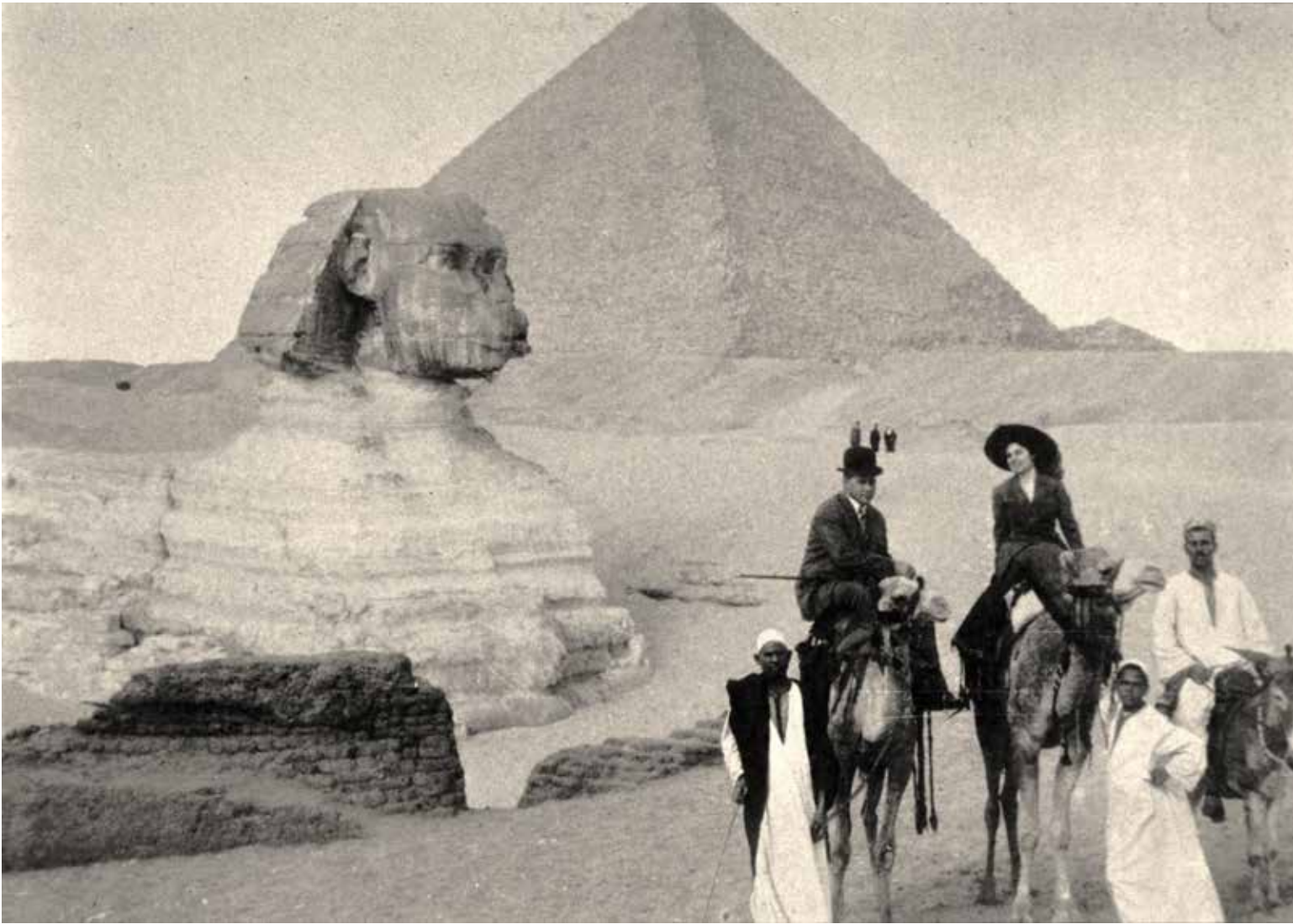
multimillionaire Henry E. Huntington. Notably, Huntington was among the initial backers of the Rodeo Land & Water Company, which played a key role in transforming the former Hammel & Denker Ranch into Beverly Hills. Given Brand’s connections, it’s probable that the Robinsons were aware of the well-funded nature of the Rodeo Land & Water Company, which instilled confidence in its ability to fulfill its developmental commitments for Beverly Hills. Additionally, it is likely that they were privy to the upcoming revelation, slated for April 1911, of the opulent new Beverly Hills Hotel, a project supported by Huntington’s financial backing.¹⁴

As Virginia later recalled to a writer, “Burton Green had built Beverly Hills. But there wasn’t one house here. There wasn’t a single thing out here. Just a little bit of a real estate office, kind of a shed, on Santa Monica Boulevard.”¹⁵ On Thursday morning, January 12, 1911, Harry went to the Rodeo Land & Water Company to see Burton Green about buying the five-acre parcel, which he did for \$7,500. The deed dictated that the residence to be built must exceed \$10,000 and that excavation must begin by March 12, with construction completed by December 12, 1911.¹⁶

Virginia’s father quickly got to work on the home’s design.¹⁷ Virginia’s uncle Brand

Above: Virginia Robinson had a widely varied group of friends. She is seen here at a party in 1975 at the apartment of her friend Alfred De La Vega, far right, with Mae West, center, and film director George Cukor, left. Courtesy VRGA.

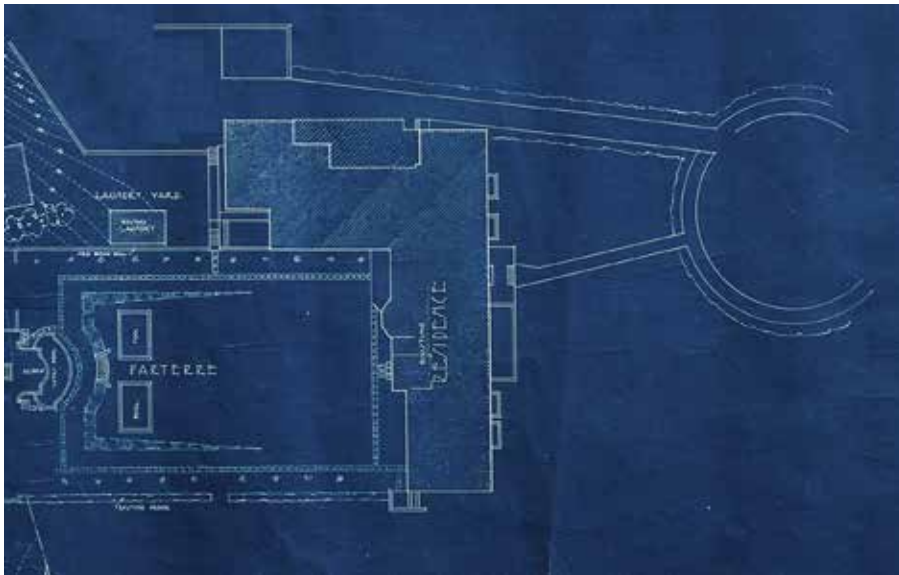
Opposite: After Harry and Virginia Robinson married in 1903, they embarked on a series of trips worldwide. Their most extended trip, from September 1909 until November 1910, started in Egypt. Courtesy VRGA.



and how he lived had a profound influence on his niece. The Robinson's estate took cues from Brand's estate in Glendale, also designed for entertaining on a large scale. It featured "party rooms" (as Brand called them), a tennis court, a swimming pool, a pool pavilion, and extensive gardens, all of which the Robinsons would ultimately achieve.¹⁸

With construction started Harry and Virginia left for a lengthy trip to Japan. In July, Virginia's mother wrote to them, "I'm crazy for you to see your house. I'm not going to tell you about your house, since you'll be here so soon, but I know you will be pleased, and you can get in sooner than you expected. People are still asking if it's a hotel."¹⁹ Their journey was cut short when, on July 11, Harry's mother, Julia Sprague Barnum, died, and the funeral was delayed until the Robinsons could return.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported on September 13 that "Mr. and Mrs. Harry Robinson have been arranging things very nicely while



Top: The barren hilltop where Harry and Virginia Robinson would build their estate, 1911. Courtesy VRGA.

Bottom: This 1924 blueprint by architects Dodd and Richards shows the scope of the initial development phase, with the site plan of the 1911 residence and associated landscape. Courtesy VRGA.

their new home is being built in the Beverly Hills. They have been residing altogether at the Los Angeles Country Club, whence they obtain a most perfect view of their own domain rising gradually but surely into an imposing pile.²⁰ The house was completed at the end of September. Today, on the inside cover of a book in her library, *A Book of Hospitalities and a Record of Guests*, one can find Virginia's inscription: "September 30, 1911, our first night in our new house."

Site Plan

Sitting at the very top of Elden Way, which terminates at a cul-de-sac, the original parcel was roughly a rectangle. From the top of Elden was a large, somewhat flat spine at the crest of the hill. This is where Dryden sited the "L" shaped, 6,000 square foot house. In the February 11, 1911 issue of *the Southwest Contractor and Manufacturer*, the house was described thus:

Harry W. Robinson has had plans prepared for, and will build by day work, a large reinforced concrete residence at Beverly Hills. The house will stand on sloping ground and will be one story in front with a high basement in the rear. The main portion will have a frontage of 132 feet and will be 40 feet deep. This will contain a broad hallway, living and dining rooms, billiard rooms, and bedrooms. A wing extending to the rear on one side will contain the kitchen and pantries and servant's quarters. There will be a garage in the basement under the rear of this wing. The house will be practically a replica of a noted Italian villa. It will contain several tiled bathrooms and will be heated by a hot air furnace. Hardwood trim and floors, leaded glass, automatic water heater, tile and marble fireplaces.²¹



Top: The Beaux Arts house sat at the top of the hill on a cul-de-sac. The earliest iteration of the landscape here had a straight concrete path to the front door, framed by Italian cypress in front, with rose standards lining both sides of the path. Photograph circa 1912, courtesy VRGA.

Bottom: Virginia Robinson planted creeping fig along the house's foundation, completely engulfing the structure in a veneer of deep green leaves. Photograph circa 1920, courtesy VRGA.



Above, opposite top: Harry and Virginia Robinson bought eucalyptus and Monterey cypress flats to fill the hillsides with trees to provide windbreak and erosion control. Photograph circa 1915, courtesy VRGA.

Opposite, bottom: Virginia Robinson is seen on the stepping stones lining both sides of the great lawn. Newly planted Italian cypress can be seen on the left. Photograph circa 1912, courtesy VRGA.

The Mediterranean-inspired Beaux-Arts house's primary façade featured a cast stone balustraded parapet and a central porch supported by paired columns and topped by urns. From the top of Elden Way, two concrete steps led up to the concrete path leading to the front door. To the right of the residence ran a long concrete driveway, which led to a large square motor court. The garages were in the basement level of the house and were accessed from the motor court.

At the rear of the house, a very long space sloped upward and was graded flat. After the Robinsons moved in, they began planning the landscape for the home, which would replace the vast barley fields. "From that time on, all manner of affectionate care and devotion was lavished on the grounds by the Mistress of the Manor. Though the estate has other extraordinary features, the gardens surpass them all. Mrs. Robinson deems them her 'life's work,' and indeed they are the heart of the homestead."²²

Thus, the Robinsons began a crash

course in horticulture. Besides books on the subject, they started ordering catalogs from nurseries, both local and national—two examples from the period in the archives are "What and When to Plant," from 1915, from the Los Angeles-based Howard and Smith nursery, and a 1917 US Government catalog of "New Plant Introductions."

When the Robinsons bought the estate, a small elderberry (*Sambucus sp.*) was the only notable plant on the grounds.²³ At their first dinner party, Virginia received a cookbook with a recipe for elderberry wine. The Robinsons made several bottles. "I've got one bottle left. They say when elderberry wine gets very old, it gets very strong. I think I'll have one party for my very special friends. Each one will get one sip. And everybody will have to bring his own glass," she later recalled.²⁴

Virginia told a reporter in 1961 that she and Harry used to "purchase flats of 100 eucalyptus and Monterey cypress seedlings for \$1."²⁵ The tall, slender eucalyptus and bushier Monterey cypress (*Hesperocyparis macrocarpa*) would provide a fast-growing





Top: Twin reflecting pools are filled with water lilies. Concrete steps lead to the bathing pool and gazebo. Photograph circa 1914, courtesy VRGA.

Bottom: At the crest of the great lawn was a small bathing pool with a gazebo. Courtesy VRGA.

Opposite: Harry Robinson performs a cannonball into the bathing pool circa 1914. Courtesy VRGA.

screen for the site's perimeter while doubling as a windbreak. The trees were also scattered on both the southwest and northeast hill-sides, providing erosion control and filling in the slopes on either side of the house. Most of these would be removed from the hillsides as those gardens were developed.

The Front Garden

As initially designed, the front of the house was landscaped simply with a pair of Italian cypress trees (*Cupressus sempervirens*) announcing the entrance walk. An *allée* of rose standards was planted along the length of the concrete walk. Besides large turf panels, various shrubs served as foundation planting along the facade. A coast live oak was planted near the balustrade in front of the library's terrace.

Early on, Virginia planted creeping fig (*Ficus repens*) at the house's base. This would quickly grow to completely engulf the house in a veneer of deep green foliage, making the structure appear to become part of the garden itself.

The Great Lawn

Because of the home's "L" shape, the great lawn was not aligned with the axis of the







front walk. One entered a wide entry hall from the front walk; at the end of that hall were offset double French doors which led to the southeast corner of the lawn. Adjacent to the back of the residence, just outside the double French doors, was a relatively shallow square patio paved with flat, red Mission tile terracotta squares. These same terracotta squares, in groupings of four, served as stepping stones along the perimeter of the great lawn. These were set in concrete pads six inches deep for stability.²⁶ Another French door opened into the dining room from this small patio.

The rectangular lawn sloped upward from the rear of the house, terminating at a flat area with concrete paving surrounded in front by the same cast stone balustrade as the top of the house. This overlooked a semi-circular bathing pool. In September 1912, a pergola shade structure was built here. Before the large swimming pool was added in 1925 Virginia would later recall that this relatively small pool served as a “poor but jolly substitute. My husband used to dive in between the goldfish, and once we had nineteen friends packed in it.”²⁷

From the front of the pool, wide concrete steps led down to a pair of rectangular concrete lily pools with concrete curbs. Low boxwood hedges eventually surrounded these.

Tall trellis walls were installed at the

northern terminus and on the northeast side of the great lawn to screen the adjacent kitchen terrace. These trellises were planted with vines. Enclosure was provided to the southwest with a densely planted hedge of evergreen shrubs. Single specimens of twenty evenly spaced Italian cypress (ten on each side) were planted along the northeast and southwest borders of the great lawn. Four pairs of Italian cypress served as a backdrop to the north, behind the bathing pool and shade structure. On the northeast side, rose standards were planted between every cypress.

An area known as the kitchen terrace was located on the other side of the tall lattice screen on the east side of the great lawn. This was a service area used by the staff and not a space the Robinsons would much see. During this earliest phase in the estate’s development, a cottage, a laundry structure, and a drying yard were built here.²⁸

Southwest and Northeast Slopes

The southwest and northeast slopes would be developed in subsequent phases. In this earliest iteration of the garden’s evolution, trees were scattered on both. On the southwest slope, a dirt path curved down the hill to the lower tennis court (known as Harry’s tennis court). Tall board-formed concrete retaining walls surrounded the court on three sides, with an adjacent viewing

Opposite top: Virginia and friends in the bathing pool, circa 1920. Courtesy VRGA.

Opposite, bottom left: This aerial photograph from 1924 shows the location of the first tennis court at the bottom of the southwest slope. It also shows the first phase of the development of the landscape complete. The southwest and northeast slopes have been planted with masses of trees. These two hillsides will be the focus of the next major phase of development, 1925-1929. Note house at top left of photo, which is the legendary “Pickfair,” the home of film stars Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, friends and neighbors of the Robinsons. Courtesy VRGA.

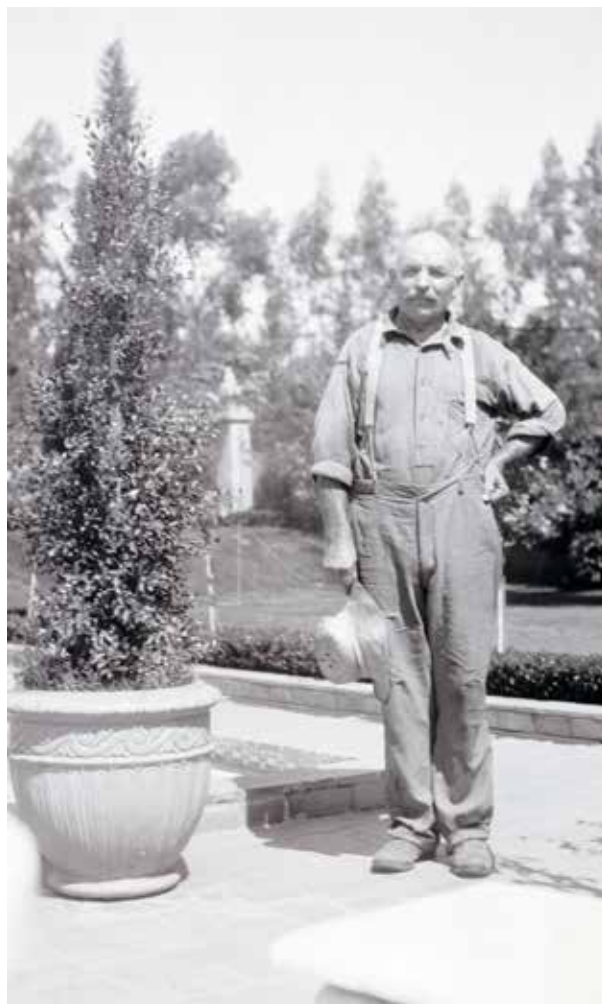
Opposite, bottom right: Harry Robinson, in the center with a bow tie, and friends on the first tennis court, circa 1920. Courtesy VRGA.

Above: The first tennis court, named “Harry’s Tennis Court” by Virginia, had tall walls of poured concrete with a viewing stand on top. Photograph circa 1915, courtesy VRGA.



Above: The northeast slope of the house, below the motor court, featured a “typical Mediterranean garden” with olive trees, pomegranates, and persimmons. They began experimenting with tropical species here by 1920. The rest of the hillside was densely planted with trees. Courtesy VRGA.

Right: Harry and Virginia’s longtime gardeners collaborated on the garden’s design. Tony Boggio, seen here, was the head gardener beginning in 1915 and worked at the estate until shortly before he died in 1948. Courtesy VRGA.



platform on top of the most towering concrete wall. On top of the concrete walls on two sides, a wood structure was covered in a fine chain link.

Aerial photos taken around 1920 show the northeast slope of the property as a very densely planted grove of trees. The Robinsons planned a “typical Mediterranean garden and planted olive trees, pomegranates, and persimmons” at the top of the slope near the house.²⁹

Gardeners – Partners in the Landscape

When Harry and Virginia moved into their new house in September 1911, they assembled the large staff required to run their household. Several early staff members became longtime employees, and Virginia would later refer to at least one as a “friend.”³⁰ Not only were they warmly regarded as servants, but many of the servant’s children would also work for J.W. Robinson’s in some capacity and even work their way up to executives.

One important early employee was Giuseppe Boggio (“Joe”). Born in Perosa, Italy, in 1885, Boggio immigrated to the States in 1911 with his wife Giovanna. He soon got a job with the Robinsons as a gardener. Around 1915, after Joe Boggio was promoted to chauffeur, his relative, Antonio Boggio, Sr. (“Tony”), took over as the new head gardener. Born in Pavone, Italy,



in 1874, Tony, his wife, Louise, and son Tony, Jr. immigrated to the States in 1903. Tony continued working as the Robinsons' gardener until he retired around 1940, and the ledgers show he continued doing small jobs for Virginia until shortly before he died in 1948.³¹

By 1935, a new gardener had been hired, who would assume the role of head gardener upon Boggio's retirement. Leno Benedetti was born in Santa Monica in 1915 to Beniamino and Lidovina Benedetti, both of whom were born in Verona, Italy, before immigrating to Santa Monica in 1909, where Beniamino began working as a gardener for the city of Venice. In May 1936, Beniamino joined his son as a gardener at the Robinson estate and would continue into the 1950s. Leno Benedetti stayed with Virginia Robinson until she died in 1977—he was one of three servants named in her will, leaving him \$10,000.³²

As longtime trusted employees, Tony Boggio and Leno Benedetti were collaborators

on the garden's design and evolution, helping Virginia Robinson fulfill her vision for what she considered her "life's work."

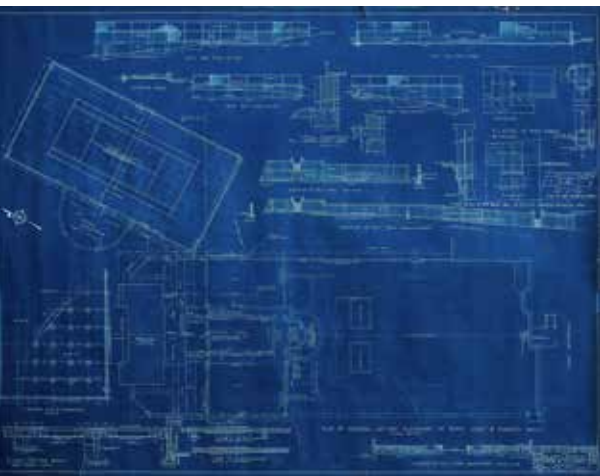
PHASE TWO: 1925-1929

1925: Pool and Pool Pavilion, and Upper Tennis Court

The next major phase of expansion and development happened in the mid-to-late 1920s. With the creation of a large swimming pool and adjacent pavilion, as well as a new tennis court, this recreational addition would become the heart of the Robinson's hectic social life. The small bathing pool had become inadequate, and Virginia wanted her own tennis court, as Harry claimed the original lower tennis court as his own. She later recalled, "He was a wonderful tennis player and he'd never play with me. So, I had a court built for myself."³³

They had acquired in 1917 a three-and-a-half-acre triangular parcel adjacent to their original five-acre plot north of the bathing

Above: Designed by architects Dodd & Richards, the pool pavilion and swimming pool became the center of the Robinson's busy social life. Photograph circa 1925, courtesy VRGA.



Top: Virginia Robinson, left, with her mother Nellie, center, and an unidentified woman, stand in front of the newly built pool pavilion and swimming pool. Courtesy VRGA.

Bottom: The 1924 Dodd & Richards blueprint showing the site plan for the new pavilion, pool, and tennis court. Courtesy VRGA.

pool.³⁴ They hired the esteemed Los Angeles architectural firm, Dodd & Richards, to design a swimming pool, a pavilion, and a tennis court in December of 1924. Architect William Richards had previously designed the flagship Robinson's store at Seventh and Grand, which was built in 1915.

Construction began in January of 1925, with GM Fletcher as the contractor.³⁵ The pool pavilion featured a blend of Palladian and eighteenth-century French influences, with three arched doors, over which were spandrels with sgraffito-like decorations of Renaissance angels blowing trumpets. Inside was a large loggia with terrazzo floors in a checkerboard pattern. The rear wall had a large cast stone fireplace with a pair of matching glazed doors leading to a broad terrazzo terrace. On either side of the loggia were men's and women's dressing rooms, showers, bathrooms, and a kitchen and service room.

In front of the pavilion was a broad upper terrace with marble benches and large terracotta pots with exotic specimens, such as banana palm trees (*Musa*) and ponytail palms (*Beaucarnea recurvata*). These benches and pots prevented people from inadvertently falling into the pool. Stairs on either side of the terrace descended to the level of the swimming pool, a large rectangle entirely covered in one-inch square cream-colored mosaic tiles, with darker accent tiles creating a pattern at the water line.

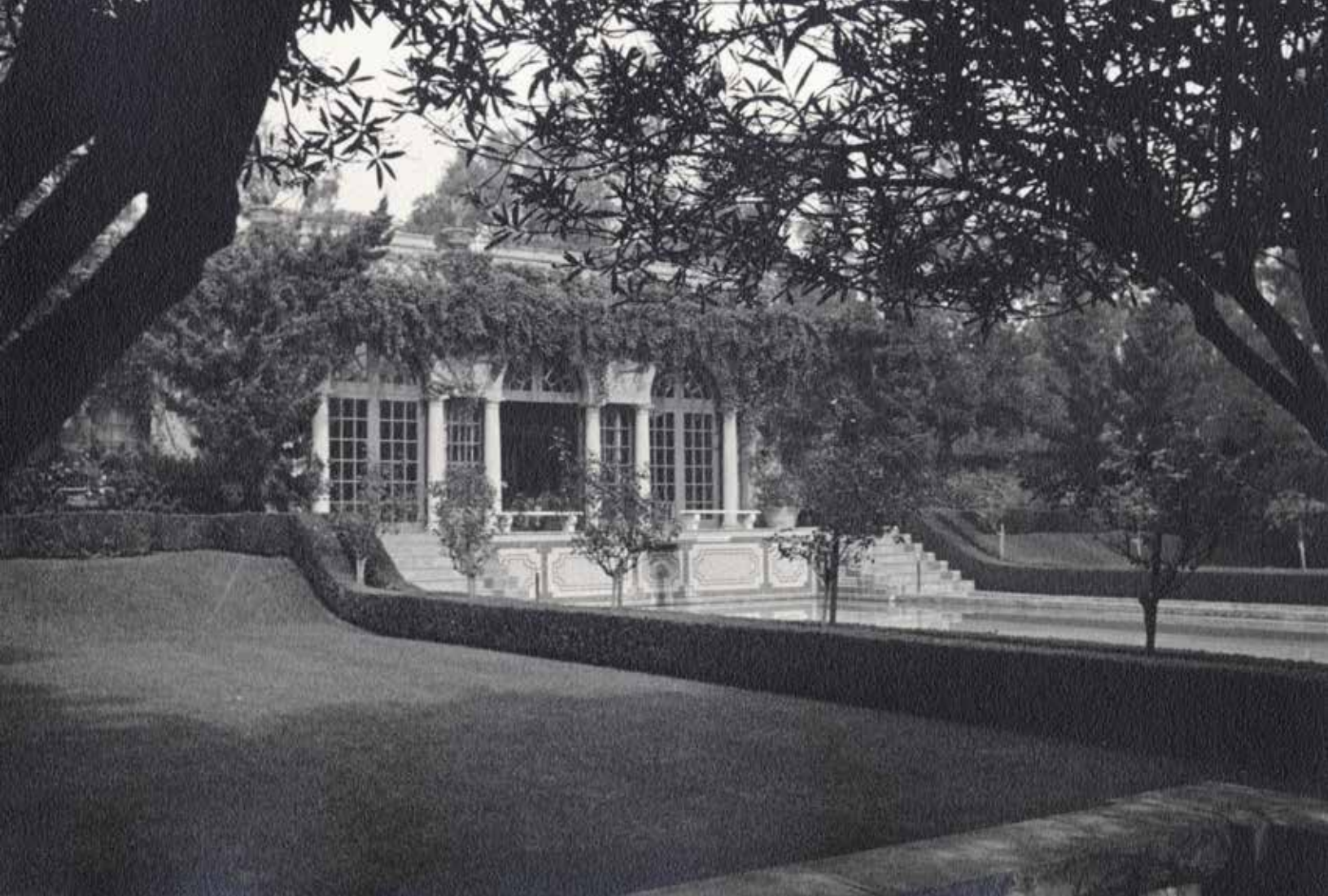
The landscape here featured double box-wood hedges planted on either side of the

pool's paving, with rose standards between the paired hedges. Panels of turf were grown outside these hedges. Steps from the shallow end of the pool ascended to a new seating area, and new cast stone balustrades enclosed the area, separating it from the great lawn. Further separation was achieved by four hot-pink-flowering oleanders planted inside the pool area. These were trained into enormous specimens, shading the seating area and screening views of the pool area from the primary residence. The Robinsons placed a marble table, a reproduction of an ancient table dug from the ruins of Pompeii, in the seating area.³⁶ Facing the table were two marble benches.

The Great Lawn

Steps descended from the new seating area to the great lawn. Here, four evenly spaced Italian cypress trees (*Cupressus sempervirens*) were planted outside the balustrade. The old bathing pool was made shallower and was re-purposed and filled with lotus. When the lotus matured, their masses of enormous leaves provided a dramatic display of foliage.

To help the existing residence relate more successfully to the new pavilion and swimming pool, Dodd & Richards made some changes to open the rear of the house to the great lawn. A wall was opened, removing a double-hung window and replacing it with a pair of French doors with adjacent glazed



sidelights. Through these double doors, an existing bedroom became an alcove of the library, which, as Virginia would later boast, had “the first bar in a home” in Beverly Hills.³⁷ Created at the height of Prohibition, it was concealed when not in use.³⁸ The new French doors almost lined up with the doors in the new pavilion, though precise axial symmetry wasn’t achieved. Boxwood hedges were planted along the foundation, and an Italian cypress was planted on either side of the new French doors.

On the east side of the great lawn, a new eight-foot-tall masonry wall was constructed to replace the vine-covered lattice that had previously screened the kitchen terrace. The stucco-covered wall started at the residence and continued to the pavilion, stepping up occasionally to account for the grade changes. The wall had a wrought-iron gate providing access up a few steps from the kitchen terrace to the great lawn. Stucco-covered standards with obelisk finials framed the entrance.

The Upper Tennis Court

A new tennis court and an adjacent, semi-circular Tea Terrace were constructed



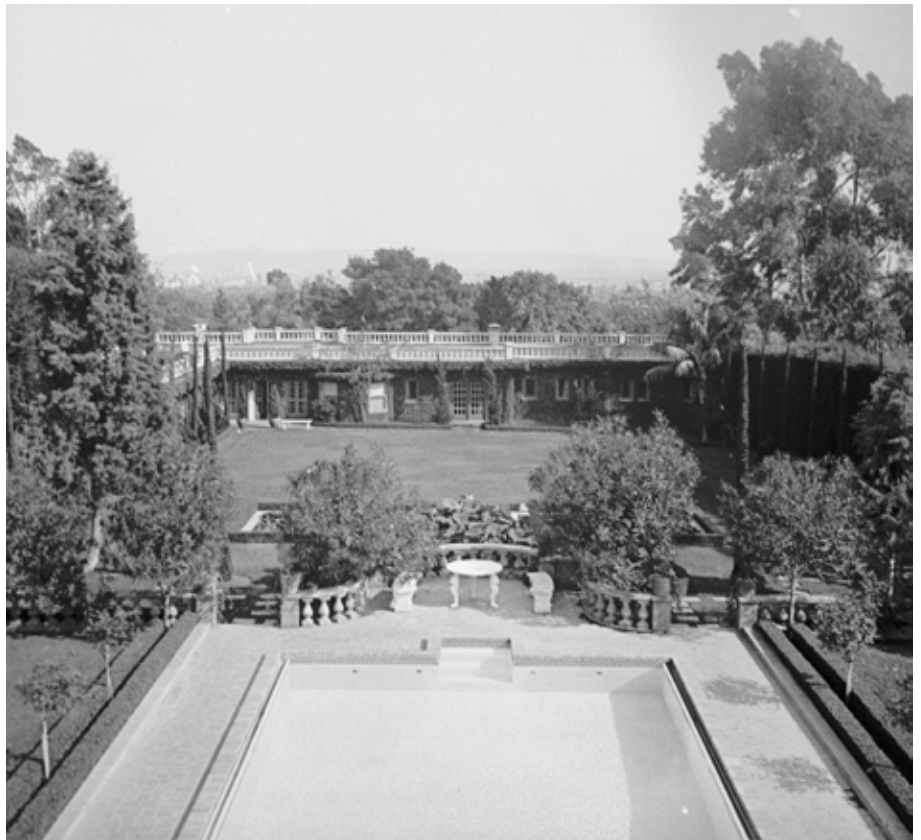
Top: The landscape featured double rows of precisely clipped boxwood hedges, with rose standards planted in the center of each double row. By the 1930s, when this photo was taken, vines had grown and obscured the sgraffito decoration above each arched door. Courtesy VRGA.

Bottom: Harry and Virginia Robinson enjoy their new swimming pool circa 1925. Courtesy VRGA.

Right: Film star Roland Young swimming in the pool with a white turban on his head. Upstairs in the 1929 billiards room addition, Virginia Robinson's card room featured Pompeii-style murals, including a, "wet, turbaned gentleman, actor Roland Young." Young was a great friend of the Robinsons and would comfort Virginia after Harry's death. Courtesy VRGA.

Bottom, left: Hot pink oleanders were planted and trained into trees, which screened the recreation area from the great lawn and the house. Kodacolor snapshot circa 1960, courtesy VRGA.

Bottom, right: When the recreation area was added in 1925, Dodd & Richards reconfigured the rear wall of the residence to open it up to the great lawn and to align it to the pool pavilion better. Photograph circa 1935, courtesy VRGA.





to the right of the pavilion. Holes were embedded in the terrace floor to accept umbrellas to shade spectators. Adjacent to the terrace was a roughly triangular planting area. Nursery receipts from the 1940s suggest Virginia replanted at least a portion of this bed with a new palette of annuals yearly, though she most likely had roses here too.³⁹ “Eiffel Tower” was said to be her favorite rose, and it’s clear she had a deep affinity for the blooms. She would plant them all over the estate, wherever she found room.

For the surface of the tennis court itself, the Dodd & Richards specifications indicate: “When the slab has thoroughly cured its field shall be treated with a chemical color control treatment which will give an olive-green color in mottled shades in strict conformity to a sample selected by the Architects. Similarly, the court markings shall be chemically treated to produce a color in violent contrast with the field. Such color will be a light gray or other shade selected by the architect which will conform a proper contrast to the field.” When dry, the court’s surface was treated with “Repello,” a penetrating sealer that gave an eggshell sheen.⁴⁰

Chain link fences with ball finials were installed atop the concrete walls of the court. The walls of the court were painted in a pink

lime wash. To harmonize, Virginia planted a vivid pink bougainvillea cutting outside the court’s north wall that she had brought back from one of her travels. The bougainvillea eventually covered the chain link and cascaded into the tennis court. The court drained down toward the northeastern slope of the garden.

The Kitchen Terrace

Access to the kitchen terrace was through a wooden gate from the tennis court area. In the kitchen terrace, a wire cage was built for the Robinsons’ capuchin monkeys. A white sapote tree from Mexico was planted to protect the monkeys from the sun. It also supplied the monkeys with fruit through the summer.

Virginia later told a journalist, “I love animals, but I never dreamed we’d have monkeys as pets. My husband used to walk from the store to the California Club for lunch every day and pass a pet shop with a monkey in the window. We’d lived in India and knew you don’t keep monkeys in the sun. So my husband paid the shop owner to put the monkey in a special spot. He also used to bring him food from the California Club. Eventually, he thought he was paying so much for the monkey’s care; he might as

Above: A new masonry wall replaced the vine-covered trellis separating the great lawn from the kitchen garden. Courtesy VRGA.



Top: The new upper tennis court with the pool pavilion in the distance. The walls of the tennis court were painted with a pink lime wash. Eventually, Virginia would plant a vivid pink bougainvillea outside the chain link fence alongside the gravel road, which has now covered the fence and cascades down into the tennis court. Circa 1925 photograph courtesy VRGA.

Bottom: When the new swimming pool was built in 1925, the old bathing pool was converted into a lotus pond. Virginia and her mother, Nellie, stand next to some giant lotus leaves circa 1927. Courtesy VRGA.

well bring him home.' The Robinsons got the monkey a mate. The animals multiplied.

"We used to have some amusing incidents with the monkeys when they were allowed to roam free," Virginia later recalled.⁴¹ "They didn't harm the gardens, but once in a while, they'd bite one of the guests."⁴²

A 1932 newspaper clipping in The Virginia Robinson archives reported that one of the monkeys had gotten loose, and "the glowing orbs of a 'Peeping Tom'" had made dozens of people call the Beverly Hills Police. "The monkey, besides gazing into sundry windows, had been tipping

over flowerpots and startling folk by rustling ghostlike through their shrubbery."⁴³ While the monkey was loose, a driver on Tower Road ran over it. "Placing his chattering little victim in the machine, the motorist, unidentified, took it to the West Los Angeles police station, where Mrs. Robinson was summoned and took charge of her pet."⁴⁴

1927: Servant's Wing and Garage; The Palm Forest

In 1927, Dodd & Richards returned to build a new servant's wing for male staff members and laundry facilities. In May 1927, the existing cottage and laundry buildings were demolished, and a separate structure matching the architectural style of the existing residence was built at a right angle to the residence's kitchen area. A patio paved in Mission tile joined the two structures. At the ground level facing the motor court, a large arched opening (porte cochere) was provided for automobiles to drive through and access the service road leading to the pool and pavilion. The exterior was sprayed with the same heavily-textured Gunite stucco as the primary residence, though the servant's wing wasn't planted with creeping fig.

The Palm Forest

Around the same time as the construction of the servant's wing, the idea for the



Above: The new tennis court with an adjacent semi-circular “tea terrace” for spectators to watch tennis matches. Circa 1930 photograph courtesy VRGA.

Bottom: The new servant’s wing was designed by Dodd & Richards in 1927. Through the porte cochère was a gravel road leading to the pool pavilion. Circa 1927 photograph courtesy VRGA.



From top: Harry, at far left, and friends with their tennis racket “banjos,” circa 1927. Courtesy VRGA.

Low walls enclosing the tea terrace served double duty as seating. Holes were countersunk in the tiled paving for umbrellas. Circa 1927 photograph courtesy VRGA.

Virginia’s mother, Nellie, at right, is still in mourning clothes for her husband Nathaniel, who died in 1924. The woman on the left is presumably Virginia’s aunt Ada. Circa 1925 photograph courtesy VRGA.

There was always a menagerie of pets at the Robinson estate. One of Harry and Virginia’s dogs is seen here, with a capuchin monkey on its back. The monkeys had a cage in the kitchen garden but were allowed to run free most of the time, and as Virginia said, “they didn’t harm the gardens. But once in a while, they’d bite one of the guests.” Circa 1929 photograph courtesy VRGA.



Above: In 1927, collaborating with landscape architect Charles Gibbs Adams, the Robinsons began developing the landscape of the northeast hillside into a “tropical garden.” A series of terraces were built, linked by pathways. This contemporary photograph shows the Palm Terrace, with its fountain and small pool filled with aquatic plants. Photograph courtesy Dennis Hill, Content Creation.

tropical Palm Forest was born. Virginia described her “tropical water garden” to a newspaper reporter and explained the practical consideration that prompted their collection of tropical plants. “Actually, we planted the garden to drain the tennis court. An awful lot of water collects there when it rains.” Because this slope faced east, it only got the cooler morning sun, and by early afternoon was shaded because of the

topography. Moisture was retained for more extended periods, and as a result, it compromised the mix of Mediterranean species plantings the Robinsons had installed in the previous fifteen years.

Discussing the issue with landscape architect Charles Gibbs Adams (1880-1953), the Robinsons decided to replace the plantings with tropical species.⁴⁵ They had already been experimenting with them—photos taken before 1925 show the planting bed adjacent to the house along the driveway having a mature and lush collection of tropical shrubs and flowers, palms, and some of Harry’s growing fern collection.

A drainage system was installed from the tennis court to gather runoff from the court. These emptied into small pools created at the top of the slope. An aviary was installed at the top of the hill, adjacent to the tennis court, with a small terrace nearby. The paving in this area was flagstone.

The circulation plan for the northeast slope took full advantage of the hilly topography. A network of long pathways was created—some straight, some meandering. Most were paved in decomposed granite with brick curbs. Brick and concrete were used for the stair risers, while steps were also decomposed granite.

Brick-paved terraces were carved out of the hillside, each one unique. These terraces offered an intimate place to stop and contemplate the gardens, rest, or read. The same cast stone balustrades used at the house enclosed some of these terraces, while others had wrought-iron railings. The largest of these, the Palm Terrace, featured a wall fountain and a small pool filled with aquatic plants. In the center of the brick-paved terrace was a rectangular reflecting pool, from which a small runnel ran at a right angle across the brick paving. The water poured out of a terracotta spout on the curved concrete wall below and into a shell-shaped basin supported by a circular plinth. From there, the water cascaded into another rectangular pool with concrete walls. This terrace had wrought-iron railings.

At the bottom of the hill, an extensive terraced Cutting Rose Garden was graded, with another brick-paved, balustraded terrace looking back up the hillside.

Starting in early 1927, the archives show the Robinsons were ordering large quantities of tropical plants, primarily from the Royal Palms Nursery in Oneco, Florida, as well as from E.O. Orpet, a famed horticulturist with a nursery in Santa Barbara.⁴⁶ The first specimens of king palms (*Archontophoenix alexandrae*) and kentia palms (*Howea fosteriana*) were planted at this time.⁴⁷



Besides these, various other palm species were planted in clumps, underplanted by a vast array of tropical shrubs and flowers from every tropical zone around the world. In the VRG archives, 485 typewritten, 3" x 5" cards, primarily from 1927-1935, document the experimental purchases of these fearless horticultural collectors.

Harry became fascinated by ferns, and his collection grew. One of his obituaries later noted, "Besides his fame as a business executive, Mr. Robinson had made a name for himself as a horticulturist. His collection of ferns at the home on Elden Way was regarded as the finest in America."⁴⁸ Another said, "To this hobby he devoted a great deal of time and money and in it he found the recreation away from business."⁴⁹

1929: The Billiards Room

In early 1929, Dodd & Richards returned to design a two-story addition to the rear of the pavilion.⁵⁰ A handsome wood-paneled billiards room was built on the ground floor and accessed through the existing arched doors of the pavilion. "'That's where the pool table is,' says the bouncy Mrs. Robinson. 'We had no room for it in the main house and put it there.'"⁵¹ From then on, the pavilion became known as the pool pavilion, not because of the swimming pool but because of the billiards table. Up a spiral staircase was Virginia Robinson's card room, which featured Pompeii-style, arabesque-style murals. Instead of Roman gods and goddesses, the Robinson's menagerie of pets, including "monkeys, parrots, ducks, turtles,

and even a wet, turbaned gentleman, actor Roland Young," were painted on the scrolls and arabesques of the wall.⁵²

Soon after the pool and tennis court were completed, Virginia invited British garden writer Marion Cran (1879-1942) to visit her garden. Cran was touring the United States and conducting research for her 1931 book *Gardens in America*. In it, she described her most pleasant afternoon:

On Beverley [sic] Hills, Mrs. Robinson had lunch for us on a loggia under trails of a great vine bearing enormous bowls of yellow waxen flowers; it was the famous, the thrice-desired Cup of Gold, *Copa d'Oro!* "It blooms from Christmas on," said my pretty hostess, "when the buds open, water plops out of them... and oh, the perfume! The hummingbirds build in the vine and their nest hangs over the table, so we eat in the dark lest the candles worry the babies."

Here was the Cup of Gold, a bowl of globed roundness; the great petals of the flower, yellow softly flushed with lilac, were amazing. Mrs. Robinson is a friend of Dr. Wilfred Fox, the Hon. Secretary of the Roads Beautifying Association in England, and I was reminded of him when we stood by her blue swimming pool; he likes open-air swimming but it is not easy to get in England. She has a famous tennis court, and an enormous rubber tree which has grown from a seed she planted twenty years ago. She was a beautiful, laughing



Top: The northeast slope was originally planted below the motor court with eucalyptus and Monterey cypress saplings the Robinsons acquired for \$1 a flat. By 1927, the northeast slope was densely populated with trees. At the top of the hill, they had begun experimenting with tropical species, as the microclimate here was suitable. Circa 1927 photograph courtesy VRGA.

Bottom: An aviary was constructed near the tennis court at the top of the slope. Here, Virginia shows one of her great-great-nieces her bird collection. Photograph circa 1962, courtesy VRGA.



Top left: In this early photograph, circa 1935, the Palm Terrace originally had a small rectangular pool beneath the large, poured concrete pool integrated into the retaining wall. This has since been removed. Courtesy VRGA.

Bottom left: Landscape architect Adams designed a circulation network on the northeast slope, connecting the various terraces. The paths were decomposed granite with brick risers and borders. Circa 1940 photograph courtesy VRGA.

Right right: Harry and Virginia experimented with various tropical species, but the King Palms thrived. Today, the King Palm forest is considered the largest stand of King Palms outside of Queensland, Australia. Circa 1950 photograph courtesy VRGA.

Opposite, top left: A terraced cutting rose garden was created with a brick-paved, balustraded terrace at the bottom of the northeast slope. Circa 1940 photograph courtesy VRGA.

Opposite, top right: Virginia is seen admiring her impressive King Palm forest circa 1969. Courtesy VRGA.

little woman with enthusiasm for growing things.

“I have the only lychee in a private garden here,” she cried—and then took us to where she grows violets by a singing rill of water where doves coo in the warm, sweet air. The lawn is twenty years old with a large stone pine which roused memories in me of Bishops court at the Cape.

That was an interesting lunch party, full of gay garden talk.⁵³



1932

On January 15, 1932, Harry and Virginia woke up to see the great lawn blanketed in a carpet of freshly fallen snow. It was the first time snow had been recorded in Los Angeles in the fifty-four years the US Weather Bureau had existed. Harry grabbed their movie camera, and with the assistance of their longtime majordomo John Bauer, they made a snowman. Virginia and Harry had a snowball fight, after which Virginia grabbed a stick and wrote “1932” in the snow. Despite the Great Depression, which Virginia later said “didn’t matter in Beverly Hills,” the year promised to be a good one for the Robinsons.⁵⁴

Soon, however, their optimism changed when Virginia began writing in her diary the next month that Harry was more and more exhausted. On February 15, he came home from work early, sick. It was soon diagnosed as an abdominal disorder, which became steadily worse, requiring surgery in May.⁵⁵ On May 17 and 18, she wrote “bad” daily in her diary. He was released in June, and Virginia began spending the night in his room, worried about his condition. After his surgery, he seemed to improve, though he was often confined to his bed. However, in late July, he suffered a relapse. On July 28, it was reported that Robinson, “who has been critically ill, today was reported to be steadily growing weaker as the fight for his life progressed. The store executive, who is 53 years old, was said to have suffered a relapse yesterday.”⁵⁶ Other newspapers reported that Robinson was “near death,” according to family members.

By August, papers reported that Robinson was beginning to regain his strength and was thought to have passed the worst of the



Above: In January 1932, Harry and Virginia woke up to see their garden blanketed in snow. They built snowmen and had a snowball fight. Virginia wrote “1932” in the snow with a stick, while their majordomo took home movies. Courtesy VRGA.

1932



Above: The week before Harry died, the couple spent as much time as they could sitting in their beloved garden. Each day, Virginia wrote in her diary, and pressed leaves and petals from the day inside the pages. The page was left blank for September 19, the day Harry died. He was buried on September 21, Virginia's birthday. Courtesy VRGA.

illness. By September, he rallied enough to leave his bed, and in their last week together, he and Virginia sat outside every day, enjoying the garden they had created. She pressed a leaf or flower petal from each precious day in her diary, with a simple inscription "with Harry in the garden." September 19 was left blank.

Harry W. Robinson died on September 19, 1932. On the page for September 21 (which was also her birthday), Virginia pasted a photo of a very young Harry and pressed a leaf and a flower spray between the pages. She inscribed "My Robby's Funeral. 10:30."⁵⁷ The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the funeral was an intimate service in the gardens he loved.

In a setting of his own making—a garden of rare and beautiful plants and

ferns gathered from the far corners of the earth—simple funeral rites were recited yesterday at this Beverly Hills home for Harry Winchester Robinson. Although the funeral services were limited to a small group, the profusion of floral pieces testified to the esteem engendered by Mr. Robinson during his lifetime in Los Angeles as a merchant and patron of the arts. Following the services at the home, private burial rites were conducted at the Forest Lawn Memorial Park.⁵⁸

Following his service, Virginia went into a period of mourning. After Harry's death, Virginia's niece Helen Chapman (1904-1961), her husband Philip (1901-1962), and daughter Ann (1930-2003) moved into the pool pavilion, staying two years.⁵⁹

Shortly after his death, Virginia began writing a series of posthumous letters to her husband, something she would continue to do for the next five years as she processed her grief:

How wondrous you have always felt – I have always felt that great pride of you every day in every way. You have a genius in so many ways but mostly your greatness is your simple straightforwardness and your strength. Every kind of strength – moral – spiritual – physical – your beautiful body. I do so adore you my Harry – your dressing room smells of you yet. Tears choke me every time I go in – do I hold you to this earth with my thoughts?⁶⁰

In another letter in December 1932, she asks Harry what he thinks of some work she's done on their garden and shares a story with him about some robins they had watched the previous spring:

Harry do you like the trimming on the westside I cut the oaks down – it's much neater but I cried after I did it because it's different that when you last saw it. Last night the robins that we watched last spring on their way north then gone south. The pecan tree still in leaf and the robins only sat and jumped about in the lawn in front of our room – looking for my Robby – they left.⁶¹

She leaned on her trusted majordomo Bauer during this dark time. The first head butler Harry and Virginia had hired Johan Taufer Bauer, known as "John," was born in Austria in 1884. He immigrated to the United States in February 1911.⁶² He lived at Elden Way until he married Borghild Gulbransen

in 1921. The couple then bought a small house in Beverly Hills. They would have two sons, John and Frank. John Bauer, Jr. would later work for J.W. Robinson's.

After Harry's death, Bauer, however, began worrying about Virginia, telling her she was "going to become poor," as she later recalled. "I think he was just frightened for me and everything. He talked about boarding up the swimming pool. He said we couldn't afford water, silly things. People talked, talked, talked about the Great Depression. And I suppose that made John depressed. He'd bought a lot on Camden and things in Bel Air and paid \$32,000 down, and then he couldn't sell any of it. I helped him all I could, but I couldn't do much."⁶³

Though Bauer was married with children, after Harry's death he began spending more nights in the servant's quarters at the Robinson residence, concerned about her. Virginia wrote in her diary: "John shot himself. 9:15 a.m. March 27, 1933. Our twenty years of association ended. The perfect servant and friend. My comfort and support during Robby's long illness. My prayers go with you John Bauer."⁶⁴ It was yet another crushing blow in her most terrible year.

Never one to linger in doom, Virginia began to come out of her bereavement in late 1933. In September of that year, nearly a year after his death, Virginia wrote Harry a letter to tell him she had played two sets of tennis that day because:

You always made me carry on – your spirit pushed me on. Your spirit – that wonderful personality...fills the house and garden...still. The store throbs with it and for you my Robby I kiss you and cling to you... your gay and valiant spirit still shines here. Every flower and leaf seems to all striving to be worthy of my husband. My cheek is on your shoulder. I cling to my love – and pray that you guide my days and deeds. Each flower I see is you – each plant as my Robby wants it."⁶⁵

By 1934, the newspapers started reporting on her social activities from which she had been uncharacteristically absent. Also in 1934, Virginia joined the Board of Directors of J. W. Robinson's—a rare woman in business then. She served until 1960.⁶⁶

Alma Whitaker, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, visited Virginia in January 1934, describing her as the "perfect hostess."

There are acres of gorgeous grounds where every imaginable type of rare fruit is raised; flowers all the year round as only California can claim;

an adorable house that is the veritable epitome of everything a home should be, lovely tennis courts where young people galore foregather almost daily; a swimming pool that is a sheer delight, and dogs rush out and make the visitor welcome with an ardent sense of hospitable responsibility. This then, is the radiant setting for that most popular of social queens here, Mrs. Harry Robinson. Charm is the dominating note both in the home and its mistress, 'without which,' as Barrie has told us, 'nothing else matters.' I am almost a professional gardener,' says the youthful head of this domain, who will even go out on a rainy day and personally tend some growing thing that must be cherished and encouraged. The first successful mangoes, the first experiments with new varieties of avocados (they now have twenty-eight bearing kinds) are thrilling events in the life of this household. There were twenty to lunch for New Year's Day, for instance. Widowed two years ago, Mrs. Robinson kept more and more within this precious citadel of hers, only now is she beginning to go out again.⁶⁷

Following a mourning period, Virginia continued to improve the gardens of her estate as she pivoted to become one of the most successful hostesses in Southern California. She set a high social standard for gracious living and entertained celebrities from the entertainment industry, such as Mae West, Charlie Chaplin, Clark Gable, Fred Astaire, Irene Dunne, Hedda Hopper, George Cukor, and Walt and Lillian Disney. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Prince Rainier and Princess Grace of Monaco, and Perle Mesta were reported guests. Creative luminaries, such as Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Zoe Akin, and guests from the region's political and financial elite, including Norman and Buffy Chandler (*Los Angeles Times* publisher) and Henry Huntington, were also regular visitors.

PHASE THREE: 1934-35

1934: The Italian Terrace Garden

In early 1934, Virginia began planning a new Italian-inspired garden to be built on the southwest slope, which until then had been planted with the various trees the Robinsons planted at the time of the home's construction in 1911. Never having created something of this scale alone, she began second-guessing herself and wrote Harry another of her posthumous letters, asking

1934–
1935



Above: The Italian Terrace Garden was built on the southwest slope starting in 1934. Circa 1990 photograph courtesy VRGA.

for his guidance:

For shame, I am crying, and you left me so much – a beautiful shining world full of memories and love and laughter. Our beautiful – adored home and garden – your spirit and vitality carry me on – only sometimes I feel that I need you so – your arms – your wisdom and strength. My darling – am I making a mess of our earthly paradise? You guide – kiss me again.⁶⁸

It is presumed she again worked with landscape architect Charles Gibbs Adams, as she had on the Palm Forest several years earlier.

Because of the hillside topography, the steep bowl-shaped indentation on the

southwest slope was graded with cuts and fills to create a series of terraces and curved walks arranged in a loosely bilateral symmetrical arrangement. Like the rest of the Robinson garden, the symmetry was slightly askew, giving the garden its charm. As part of an intricate water system, a series of terraces with small fountains or pools flowed down the terraced hillside. The sound of bubbling water came and went as one descended into the garden.

Virginia planted the garden so that various colors and fragrances would enhance the experience of exploring these spaces throughout the year. The plant palette was primarily Mediterranean species, with sub-tropical and tropical plant material sprinkled throughout.

The Italian Terrace Garden was planned to provide contrasting experiences, some in full sun, others completely shaded and obscure. This provided romantic views through the densely leaved trees to glimpses of sun and sky or through shaded, glossy greenery to more darkly dramatic openings with decorative stonework below.

One entered the Italian Terrace Garden from the center of the great lawn. A straight brick-paved path crossed another at a right angle and continued across the crest of the hill at a slight downward slope, turning direction and descending to a brick-paved landing. From here one descended to the first of five unique terraces, the Three Frog Fountain Terrace. Below are the Citrus Terrace, Lion Terrace, and Neptune Terrace, all arranged on a central axis that angled down to the bottom of the property, terminating at the Three-Tiered Fountain Terrace. As in the best Mediterranean gardens, an intricate series of narrow runnels, pools, and fountains activated the axial spine while providing water's pleasing sounds, sights, and cooling effect.

The Three Frog Fountain and Musical Stairs

The terrace known today as the Three Frog Fountain (though she didn't add the frog sculptures until years later) was square and paved in brick. Poured concrete walls enclosed the terrace, some featuring cast stone balustrades. A circular pool with a concrete curb was at the center of the terrace. In the middle of this was a classical fountain comprised of a three-sided plinth with concave curves, bulbous columnar support, and a gadrooned bowl with a fountain jet.

Two circular openings in the brick floor featured multi-trunk trees. These were not symmetrical; one was quite close to the circular pool, and the other was offset near the



Left: The Italian Terrace Garden was accessed from the great lawn via a brick pathway. Kodacolor snapshot from 1962 courtesy VRGA.

Below: Known today as the Three Frog Fountain (the frogs were added later), the brick-paved square terrace had balustraded walls with a circular pool and fountain at its center. From the pool, a channel was cut, which fed the nearby Musical Stairs. Circa 1940 photograph courtesy VRGA.





According to composer Les Baxter, the Musical Stairs was designed so that water would run down the center of the stairs, "each step a different tone." Undated snapshot courtesy VRGA.

southeast corner of the terrace. A pair of matched marble benches were placed at the open southern edge of the terrace, to prevent people from falling over the steep open edge, and for viewing the garden terraces below.

The south edge of the concrete curb surrounding the circular pool was cut with an opening, and the water from the pool spilled into a runnel cut into the brick paving. This runnel was made from inverted terracotta roof tiles or sewer pipe cut in half. It fed the delightful Musical Stairs, a series of eight brick-paved steps bordered on both sides by a brick ramp that led to a small landing, with more steps leading to the path below. In the center of the steps, the runnel from the circular pool cascaded down into runnels along each step. According to her friend, composer Les Baxter, "the water was meant to run down the stairway, each step a different tone."⁶⁹

As one descended the Musical Stairs, at the terminus was a poured concrete wall with an embedded family crest, flanked by two poured concrete squared plinths, which would hold large pots. The runnel ran from the stairs across the brick path to the concrete wall. This wall naturally amplified the sound of the water from the Musical Stairs.

This long, gently curving brick pathway led east and west. Going west, it terminated on the very long, steep sloping path from the parking area near the pavilion, leading down to a small terrace with steps leading down to the lower tennis court. The path curved east and met the long path parallel to the great lawn. Whichever way one went, pathways emerged at right angles to take the visitor down several stairs to the next terrace, the Citrus Terrace. The hillside between had a sizable sloping planting bed filled with a mix of trees, shrubs, and flowers appropriate to a Mediterranean climate.

The Citrus Terrace

At the center of the curved Citrus Terrace, along the Italian Terrace Garden's axis, was an arched opening with a concrete semi-circular pool adjacent. This was called the Grotto. Water from the long runnel cascading down from the Three Frog Fountain poured from the ceiling of the Grotto into this pool. This arched opening was set into a long, relatively low, poured concrete wall. A balustrade sat atop a taller concrete wall over the Grotto. The brick-paved terrace had circular openings for trees, which were primarily citrus, hence the name of this terrace.

From the center of the Citrus Terrace, down brick steps enclosed by a concrete ramp, one descended to what is now known as the Lion Terrace.



At the bottom of the Musical Stairs, a runnel terminated at a poured concrete wall with an embedded family crest. Curved brick-paved pathways traveled east and west, leading down to the Citrus Terrace. 1962 Kodacolor print courtesy VRGA.



The Lion Terrace

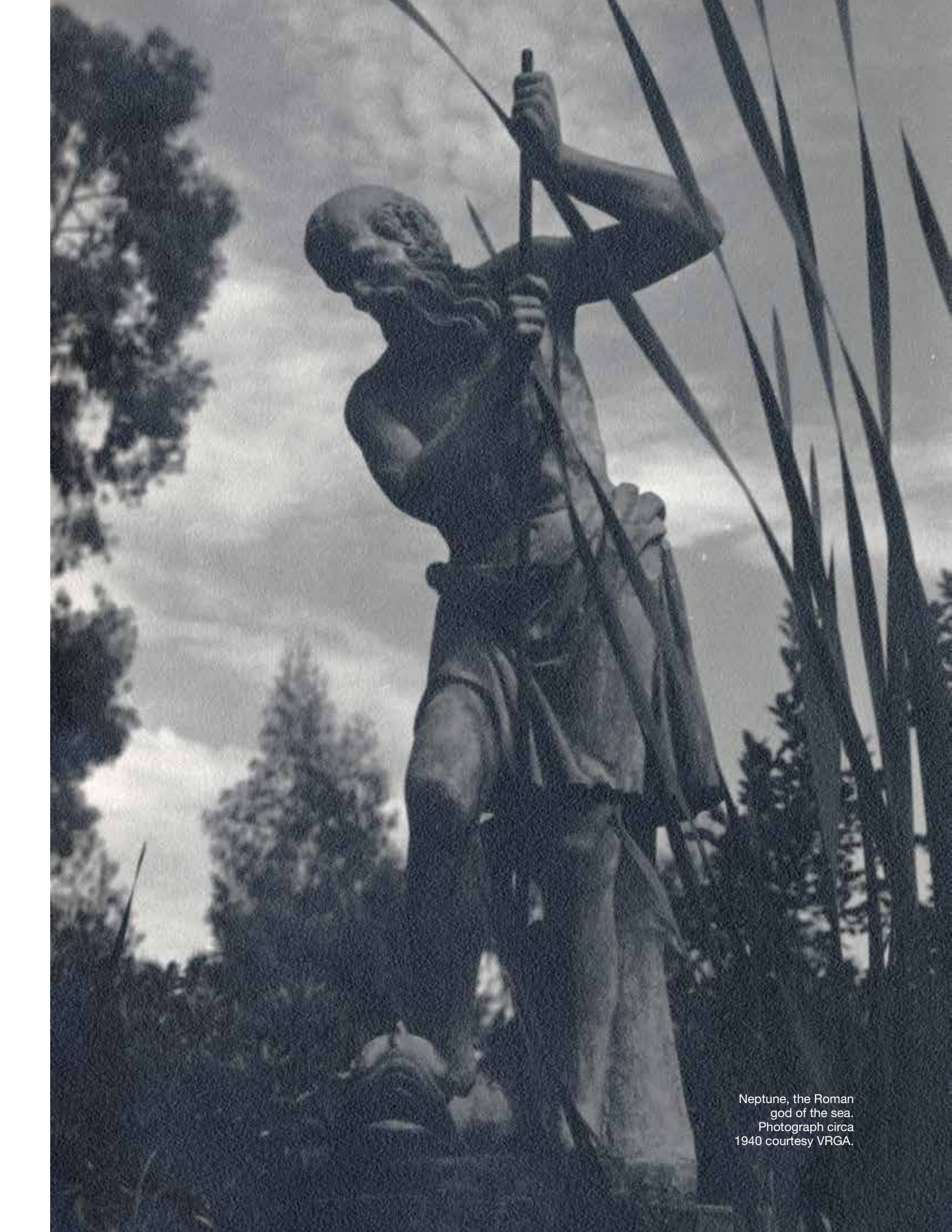
At the top of the stairs descending onto the Lion Terrace, a pair of brick-topped concrete standards served as a base for a pair of large terracotta pots. These are visible in the earliest photos of the terrace.⁷⁰ These terracotta pots were replaced at some point, probably early on, by a couple of antique terracotta lions, each posing with one paw holding up a crested shield. Though the two lions appeared to be mirror images, each face had a unique facial expression, among other minor differences. The lions sat atop a poured concrete wall that embraced this

Clockwise from top left: The long curved Citrus Terrace had circular openings for various citrus trees. The back concrete wall featured an arched opening with a semi-circular pool. Water from above cascaded into this pool. Circa 1940 photograph courtesy VRGA.

On the long, curved concrete wall of the Lion Terrace, lion's heads spout water jets into rectangular concrete pools. In the earliest iteration of this space, the pair of lions have not yet been installed. Instead, large terracotta pots sit on the concrete and brick plinths. Wires are installed to train horizontal espaliered plants, which appear to be roses, circa 1940.

Virginia points to the terracotta sculpture of Neptune at the Neptune Terrace in 1962. Kodacolor snapshot courtesy VRGA.

By the time this Kodacolor snapshot was taken in 1962, the terracotta pots had been replaced by the pair of antique terracotta lions. Courtesy VRGA.



Neptune, the Roman
god of the sea.
Photograph circa
1940 courtesy VRGA.

broad, brick-paved terrace with a long and gentle curve. These walls had wires installed to train espaliered shrubs and trees.

At the base of the brick stairs leading from the Citrus Terrace were paired rectangular poured concrete walls enclosing small pools fed from the runnel and Grotto above. The water flowed from terracotta lion's head spouts embedded in the concrete wall and into the small pools.

The Neptune Terrace

Through a portal of two Italian cypress trees and down a final set of brick stairs along the primary axis was the Neptune Terrace. The terminus of this sequence was a rectangular concrete pool surrounded by a low, squared concrete curb. On top of the wall overlooking this pool was a large terracotta sculpture of Neptune, the Roman god of the sea. His foot rested upon a terracotta dolphin, which spat a stream of water into the pool. Two circular planting beds were arranged asymmetrically on either side of the pool.

The terrace is enclosed by cast stone balustrade walls, with a concrete rail. Three sides were at right angles, but two walls tapered inward toward the wide staircase leading up to the Lion Terrace.

From the terraces described above, the hillside east was graded to have a series of flat areas planted with evenly spaced rows of trees. To the west of the Citrus Terrace, a meandering brick path led to the Coral Tree Knoll, before descending a long, brick-paved staircase to the lower tennis court. A small balustraded terrace was at the bottom.

A long, curved brick path led to the Three-Tiered Italian Fountain.

The Three-Tiered Fountain Terrace

The sequence of terraces and water features organized along the central axial spine of the Italian Terrace Garden terminated at the bottom of the property at an area now known as the Three-Tiered Fountain. A large square terrace, paved with moss-covered brick, was enclosed by poured concrete walls on all sides. Two access points were provided from each side. One tall, poured concrete wall had another family crest embedded, and underneath it was a concrete bench. The surrounding walls were shorter. At the center of the terrace was a circular concrete pool with a central jet fountain. The three-tiered fountain was added later. A path exited east from this terrace, running along the property line, before returning to the Lion Terrace.

The Coral Tree Knoll

The Coral Tree Knoll was a graded hill on the west side of the Italian Terrace Garden, near the old lower tennis court. The crest of the hill had a circular decomposed granite terrace, and the coral tree was planted in the center.

This part of the garden was developed before the Italian Terrace Garden. Photos of this slope circa 1920 show a terraced, graded knoll with a flat, circular space on top, planted with trees. It's unclear if the coral tree (*Erythrina caffra*) was planted that early or exactly when it was planted; there have been conflicting stories about the origin and age of the tree.



Neptune rests his foot on top of a dolphin, who spits a stream of water into a pool below. Photograph circa 1990 courtesy VRGA.



Left: In this contemporary photograph, the mature coral tree is planted at the center of a circular terrace at the top of a knoll. Photograph courtesy Dennis Hill, Content Creation.

Middle: In 1935, Virginia had a poured concrete wall built in front of the house along Elden Way. Circa 1940 photograph courtesy VRGA.

Bottom: The landscape at the front of the house circa 1940 featured rose standards planted between boxwood hedges. The house is completely engulfed in creeping fig. Courtesy VRGA.



The Gallery and Balconies on the House

In 1935, Virginia was ready to turn what had been Harry's bedroom into a long gallery overlooking the great lawn and the Italian Terrace Garden. In October, the wall facing the great lawn was completely reconfigured. A new fireplace was installed, and on either side of the fireplace, larger fixed panes of glass replaced a series of much smaller windows. Two steel balconies were built on the southwest-facing elevation, which allowed Virginia to look out over her new Italian Terrace Garden.⁷¹ These changes gave Virginia an exquisite private sanctuary, a gallery with plenty of seating, a cozy fireplace, and windows overlooking her beloved gardens.

Each new season brought delights to all the senses as the garden matured. In February, the scent of citrus filled the Gallery with its beautiful aromas. Her large coral tree would start blooming its red-orange flowers in March. From here, on the horizon, she could see Catalina Island on a clear day, framed between towering palm trees. "This view, that fragrance, and her closeness to the gardens, Virginia proclaimed, was what maintained her health and kept her young."⁷²

It was also around this time that Virginia planted a cluster of junipers (*Juniperus torulosa*) at the house's foundation underneath the kitchen windows. This would be allowed to grow up and cover the windows from the kitchen to the great lawn, affording Virginia and her guests privacy.⁷³





1954 – 1958

PHASE FOUR: 1954-58

1954-1958: Terrazzo Terraces and Loggia

In the mid to late-1950s, Virginia made the last significant changes to her house and garden. First, in July of 1954, she had the kitchen remodeled.⁷⁴ Around that same time, she removed the two rectangular concrete lily pools from the great lawn. They can be seen in a 1953 aerial photograph, but they no longer exist in a Kodacolor snapshot dated June 1955. Presumably, both of these changes happened because she had begun entertaining at a much larger scale after World War II and needed the open space on the lawn and a more efficient kitchen.

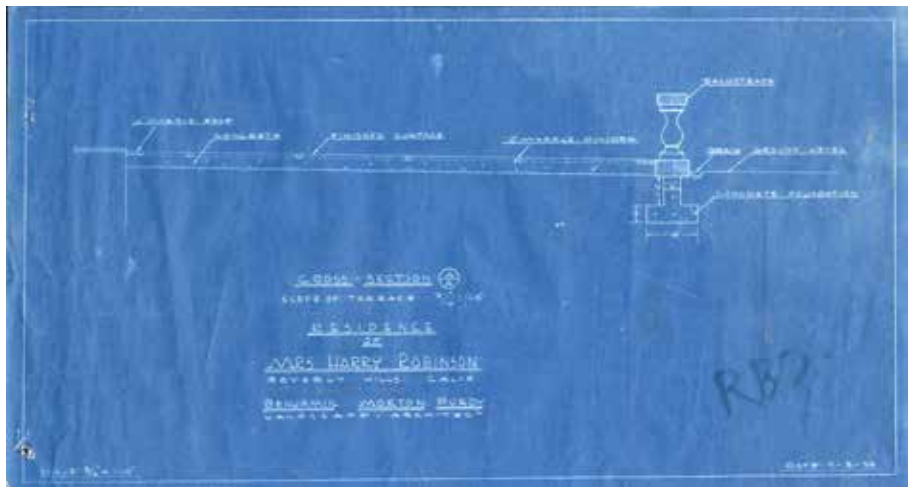
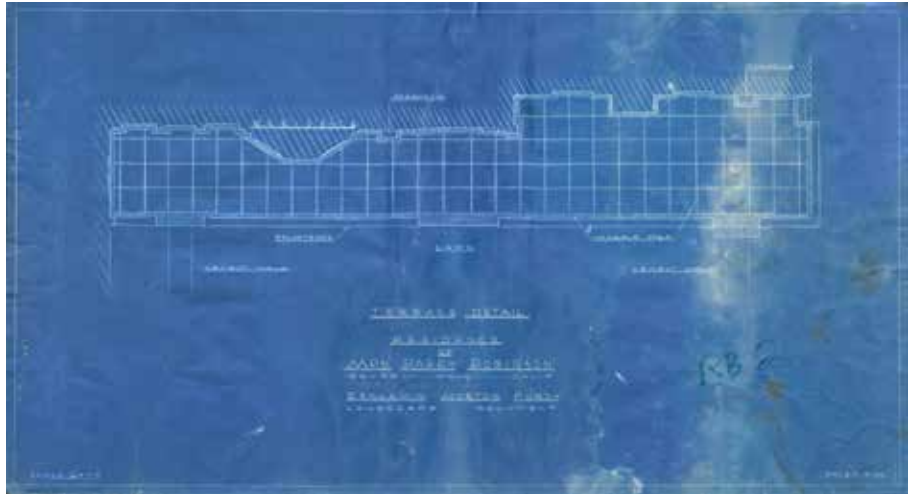
From 1955 until she died, one of the large-scale parties she had annually was a dinner dance for 500 people to celebrate the opening of the Hollywood Bowl, an event honoring the Hollywood Bowl Patroness Committee. This was always held on the last Sunday in June. She also celebrated her birthday (which was really September 21) on the night of the first full moon in August, and it became known as her “August Moon” party.

After removing the two lily pools, Virginia observed, “My back lawn takes enormous parties. It was built for parties. Once I had a party, and I didn’t know who anybody was. It was very funny. When I came into the garden, Mary Pickford came over and told me ‘Goodness, this is disgraceful. No one has the slightest idea who you are.’ I said that was all right, that I’d just go back to my room but Mary wouldn’t hear of it. She said to one of the butlers, ‘I want two chairs placed here very prominently for Mrs. Robinson and myself. We will sit here and everybody is to be introduced to us when they come in. That was very nice of Mary. She knew how to manage so well.’⁷⁵

In June 1955, she hired a butler who later became her next majordomo and was a trusted servant and friend for the next fifteen years, until November 1971.⁷⁶ Charles G. Curtis (1902-1976) had been an interior designer before becoming a domestic servant in Miami just after World War II. Virginia trusted his style and taste so much that she sought his approval when planning a dress for one of her legendary parties. After Curtis arrived, he designed these large-scale soirees’ decor, menus, and guest lists.



This page: By 1955, the two lily ponds were removed to accommodate the large-scale parties Virginia regularly had. 1960s photograph courtesy VRGA.



This page: Landscape architect Benjamin Morton Purdy designed a broad green terrazzo terrace running the full length of the back of the house, enclosed by a balustrade matching the one on top of the house. Courtesy VRGA.

Opposite, left: Benjamin Morton Purdy's blueprint for the reconfiguration of the circulation for the great lawn. Purdy replaced the old paving stones with poured concrete pathways dyed deep green. Courtesy VRGA.

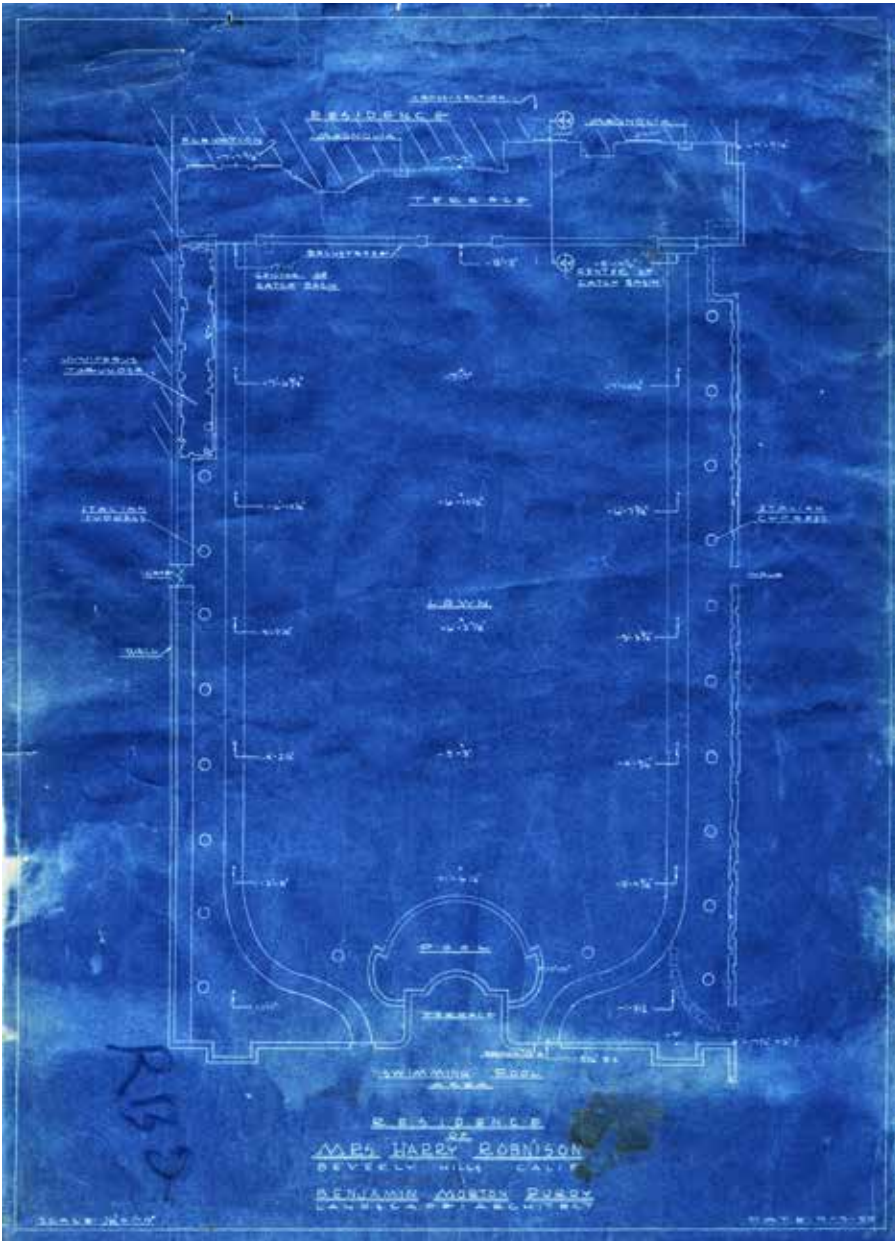
Opposite, right: The balustrade served double duty as seating. Virginia is seen here with her great-niece Ann Chapman Bonifield and Ann's daughters Lucy and Barbara. Kodacolor snapshot courtesy VRGA.

Opposite, bottom: The new terrazzo and marble terrace, designed by landscape architect Benjamin Morton Purdy, was enclosed by a balustrade mirroring the one on top of the house. Purdy also removed the square Mission tile steppingstones and designed a pair of green-stained concrete paths that led to the Pool and Pool Pavilion. Courtesy VRGA.

It was Curtis who suggested to Virginia that the relatively small patio at the back of the house was inadequate for the type of parties she was now throwing and that something much larger would enhance the function of the house, which could be used for "dining and dancing."⁷⁷ He also suggested modifying the entry experience to harmonize with what was planned for the rear terrace.

To turn their ideas into plans, Virginia brought high-society Beverly Hills landscape architect Benjamin Morton Purdy (1888-1964) out of retirement. Purdy had been one of the highest-profile landscape architects for wealthy and Hollywood clients during the Great Depression. By 1938, the *Los Angeles Times* society page column, "Chatterbox," declared, "When God made plans for a landscape architect, He used Ben Purdy as His model and then threw away the plans." Some of Purdy's clients of the 1930s included film stars William Powell, Fred MacMurray, and Shirley Temple, while the grandest project was "Casa Encantada," the magnificent estate of Hilda Boldt Weber.⁷⁸

Purdy designed a broad green terrazzo



terrace which was laid at the rear of the house and directly adjacent to it. It was bordered by dark green marble. The terrace was enclosed by a balustrade mirroring the one on the roof. Virginia would later say, "I love the balustrade which matches the balustrade around the top of the house. I still have the original mold for it."⁷⁹ The terrace addition cost \$10,000. After completing it, Virginia always had her special table set on the west side of it.⁸⁰

Though Purdy's design featured two planting wells on the terrace next to the house for espaliered magnolia, these were omitted in the final design, and potted trees were substituted.⁸¹

The balustrade had a large central opening onto the center of the great lawn. Two smaller openings on either end of the

terrace were provided to access the great lawn. Two new concrete pathways, stained green, replaced the old Mission tile paving stones, connecting the house to the pool area.

At the front of the house, Purdy designed a much grander entrance court, paved in a large checkerboard pattern of two-toned gray and green terrazzo. The entry path now extended the entire width of the porticoed front terrace. In the center, eight squares were omitted to create a planting bed. A neoclassical urn was placed in the center of this planting strip, while more urns and marble benches adorned the rest of this grand entrance. The entry terrace was bordered with deep green marble and paved in the same checkerboard terrazzo.

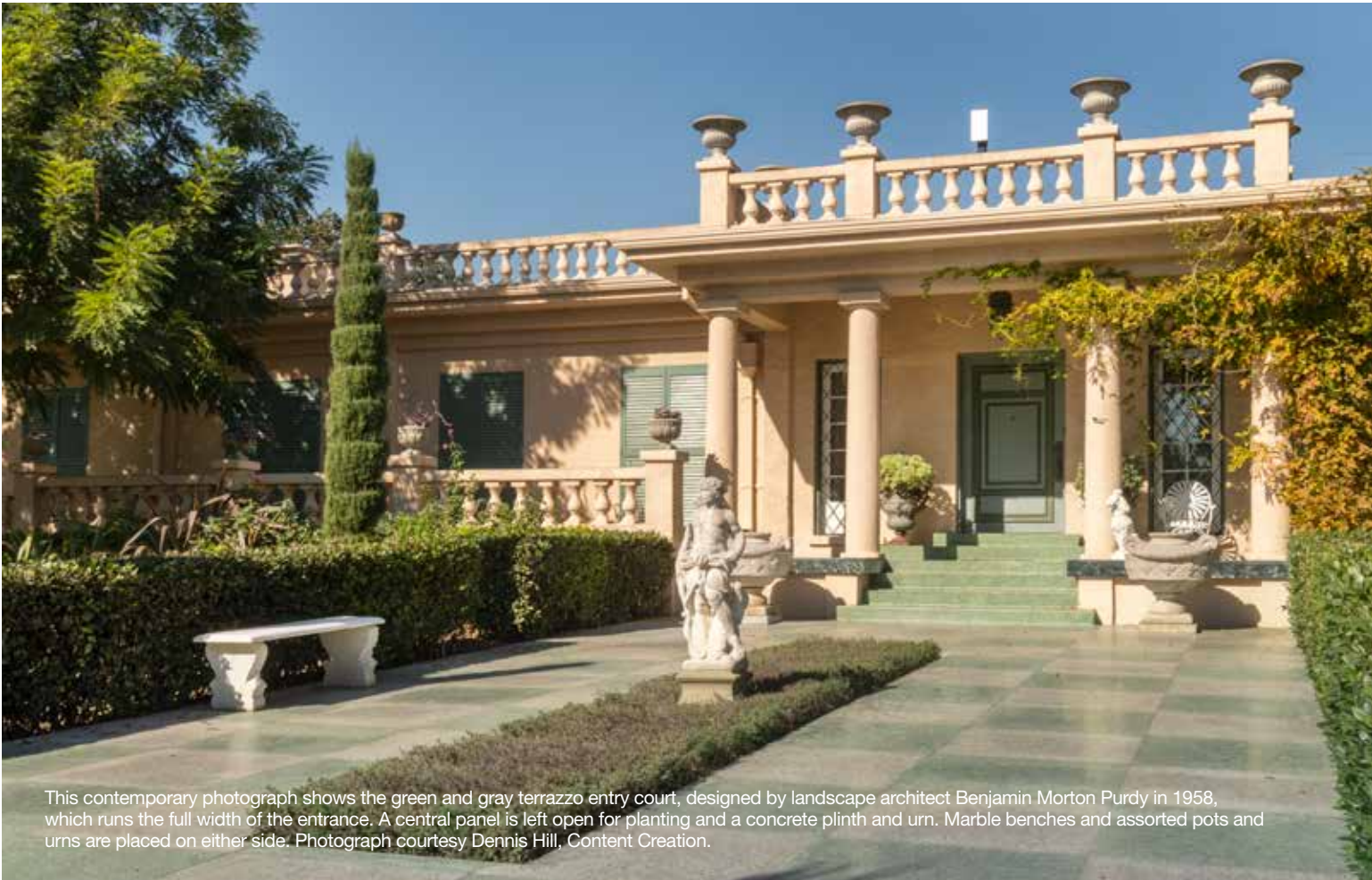
Providing a transition from this grand





This page: Kodacolor snapshots from the 1960s show Virginia's large-scale entertainment of the period. Some notable guests are seen in the top row. Left: Actress Agnes Moorehead. Middle: Designers Leonard Stanley, left, and Tony Duquette, right, with Virginia. Right: Virginia with gossip columnist Hedda Hopper. Courtesy VRGA





This contemporary photograph shows the green and gray terrazzo entry court, designed by landscape architect Benjamin Morton Purdy in 1958, which runs the full width of the entrance. A central panel is left open for planting and a concrete plinth and urn. Marble benches and assorted pots and urns are placed on either side. Photograph courtesy Dennis Hill, Content Creation.

new entrance to Elden Way was “difficult as the dead-end street curves at the front,” Virginia would later tell a journalist.⁸² Purdy fixed the awkward transition from the wide entry to the cul-de-sac by using an off-centered, narrower set of concrete steps, coming from Elden Way and then making a ninety-degree turn left to a concrete pad. Three more concrete steps ascend to the new terrazzo entrance court.

Finally, at Curtis’ suggestion, the rear loggia off the dining room was roofed over, and a checkerboard of pink and green terrazzo was poured. The walls were mirrored, and metal faux-painted marble neoclassical detailing was added. “This balcony-like space, with no fourth wall, affords an open-air view over the Palm Forest, which unrolls in a verdant carpet below. Mirrors on two facing walls reflect the tops of the palms as they wave in the breeze, exaggerating the visitor’s sense of being suspended above the tree line. The effect is of floating in space, the palm fronds tickling the soles of your feet.”⁸³ According to her good friend, composer Les Baxter, this elegant and romantic

loggia became her favorite spot on the estate.⁸⁴

After these changes took place, no other significant changes to the house or garden happened until Virginia’s death in 1977.

CONCLUSION

By the early 1970s, Virginia was in her nineties and began contemplating leaving her house and gardens to the Los Angeles County Arboretum. On February 11, 1972, Virginia invited Dr. Francis Ching to her house. Ching was appointed the Director of the Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens in Arcadia in 1970. Director Ching conferred with Virginia, and they discussed the idea and began to work out details.

Ching was enthusiastic about the proposed gift, primarily because her estate was a unique microclimate, very different from the climate in Arcadia. It would be conducive to experimentation with tropical plants. As he later told *LASCA Leaves*, “The mild climate in this particular area of Beverly Hills provides ideal outdoor conditions for the cultivation of tropical and sub-tropical type plants that



Above: Virginia Robinson talks to her majordomo, Charles G. Curtis, on the new terrazzo entry court. The idea for the new court and the rear terrazzo terrace came from Curtis, an interior designer before becoming a domestic servant after World War II. By 1958, the creeping fig had been removed from the structure. Kodachrome snapshot, circa 1962, courtesy VRGA.



Above: Virginia was honored with a dinner party at the Arboretum Demonstration Garden to celebrate her generous gift to the Los Angeles County Arboretum, 1974. She is seen here with Supervisor Peter Schabarum, standing, and her attorney Odell McConnell. Courtesy VRGA.

the other facilities cannot duplicate. Because of this fact, the garden will serve as a major research center of the Department for the testing and selection of plants.”⁸⁵

By this time, the king palms in the Palm Forest covered two-and-a-half acres and so altered the climate there that it was regularly ten degrees cooler than the rest of the gardens. Because of the unique microclimate, the old banyan trees (*Ficus rubiginosa*) reverted to their tropical habit, sprouting aerial roots. From the upper branches, long appendages grew down twenty or thirty feet to plunge through the humid air and into moist earth. “To have inspired such behavior in the dry California climate is quite rare and indicates how unusual this palm grove microclimate has become.”⁸⁶

Shortly after that, on February 24, 1972, Virginia executed her last will. In it, she explained her rationale for the gift. “My residence in an area unique in Southern California, with climatic conditions affording the opportunity of growing plants of a more tropical

type. The development and plantings of the estate represent many years of thought and effort on the part of my late husband, Harry W. Robinson, and myself. It is my desire that said estate be perpetuated as an arboretum or botanic garden for the benefit of the general public, with no industrial or commercial activity thereon and no operations which would mar or detract from the appearance of such garden.”⁸⁷

On Valentine’s Day, 1974, she gift-deeded her property to the County. “Under the terms of the agreement, Mrs. Robinson will retain a life estate in the property and the County will not have unrestricted access until after her death. For this reason, completion of comprehensive facility development and service programs is not expected until the County assumes possession of the property. These programs must satisfactorily resolve the potential problems of access, parking, traffic congestion and disruption of the neighborhood to enable the County to operate the estate as a public facility.”⁸⁸

The next month, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors signed the agreement to accept Virginia’s gift. In a letter to James S. Mize, Executive Officer of the Board of Supervisors, Virginia thanked him for his letter informing her of this. “This marks the realization of my dream that these beautiful gardens which my husband, Harry Robinson, and I helped to create will be preserved in perpetuity for the



enjoyment of people of Los Angeles County.⁸⁹

On September 10, 1974, the Arboretum hosted a reception and dinner for 150 guests to honor Virginia and her generous gift. Held at the Demonstration Home Gardens, Virginia was escorted by her attorney, Odell McConnell.⁹⁰

Virginia Robinson died on August 5, 1977—just forty-seven days before her hundredth birthday.⁹¹ Her funeral was held on August 9 at 10 a.m. at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Beverly Hills. Virginia's monkeys were given away, but Ivo and her black poodle Monet still lived at the estate.⁹²

After her death, the Arboretum could fully access the site and begin planning

its conversion from a private residence to a public Arboretum. On January 1, 1978, The Virginia Robinson Gardens was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It opened to the public in 1982.

Upon her passing, Virginia had lived in her residence for an impressive sixty-six years. With her departure, Beverly Hills bid farewell to a vibrant embodiment of a bygone era marked by grace. Preserving her uniquely personal home and garden is a tribute to a woman who navigated the transition from the Belle Époque to the Jet Age. It continues to fulfill her vision of the gardens as a lasting testament to the enduring love shared between Harry and Virginia Robinson.

Above: Virginia Robinson. 1877 – 1977.
Courtesy VRGA.

La Terrasse Dans la Pluie

*The long green terrace edging the long gracious house
Between the cypress hedges overlooking the hollow garden
And beyond, the pools, the fountains, the oleanders, and the Pavilion
Are beautiful in the moonlight
The sounds of the violins
The dancers interweaving
Make life.
Beyond, the caged monkeys and strange birds
And the massed trees
Look towards the lighted Pavilion and the bright terrace
Out of the shadows*

*But there will be nights when no candlelight and torches or violins
Make life on the terrace
Instead, la pluie sa tombe, sa tombe
Washing the green terrace with soft waves
Reaching through the green turf of the hollow gardens
To the root-mat under
Bringing from leaf and bark of the dark trees
The scent of the earth, of life
And she who will stand a while
Beyond the glass wall of the gracious house
Will open a door and walk on the rain washed terrace
As aware of the thankful roots
Of the earth scents, and the strong slant of the rain in the air
As the sod and the flowering darkness
And be happy—
Without torch or candle or violins or moonlit
...souvenirs
Because, this too, is life*

This poem by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and poet Zoe Akins was written as a tribute to her friend Virginia Robinson. It would be the last poem Akins wrote before her death in 1958. According to Virginia's last majordomo Ivo Hadjiev, when Akins presented the poem to Virginia, she invited

Agnes Moorehead to read it at the pool pavilion to a few good friends, including Ethel Barrymore. Then, Akins gifted Virginia the pair of bronze cranes that now sit on either side of the lotus pool.⁹³ This poem was later read as a eulogy to Virginia Robinson at her funeral.⁹⁴



Left: “The sounds of violins...make life.” Photograph circa 1970, courtesy VRGA.

Bottom left: “But there will be nights when no candlelight and torches or violins make life on the terrace. Instead, la pluie sa tombe, sa tombe. (the rain it falls, it falls).” Photograph circa 1990, courtesy VRGA

Bottom right: One of Virginia Robinson’s closest friends was actress Agnes Moorehead, who first read Zoe Akins’ poem to Virginia. She is seen here with Virginia and Frank McCarthy, film producer and former brigadier general. Courtesy VRGA.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eden editor Steven Keylon lives in Palm Springs, California, and writes and lectures about Southern California’s cultural landscapes. He is the past president of CGLHS and serves as vice president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. He is also on the board of DocomomoUS/SoCal. He is the author of several books: *The Design of Herbert W. Burns* (2018), *The Modern Architecture of Hugh Michael Kaptur* (2019), and is the co-author, with Tracy Conrad and Steve Vaught, of *Tom O’Donnell: Generous Spirit of Palm Springs* (2022).

Keylon found out during the research of the Virginia Robinson Gardens that he is the eighth cousin of Virginia Robinson. They share an ancestor, Willem Jacobse Van Boerum, who immigrated from the Netherlands with his family in 1649 when New York was Nieuw Amsterdam.

The author would like to thank Patty Elias, Friends of Robinson Gardens Archive coordinator, and her assistant Miya Taguchi, for their Herculean assistance during this project. Having partners in crime like you makes it all enjoyable!

Endnotes

- 1 "Mrs. Harry Robinson Known Widely as Perfect Hostess," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1934, 41.
- 2 Wagner, Walter. *Beverly Hills: Inside the Golden Ghetto*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1976, 100.
- 3 Interview with Les Baxter, October 5, 1983, typewritten notes. VRG Archives.
- 4 Typewritten remembrances from Ivo. VRG Archives.
- 5 Interview with Les Baxter, October 5, 1983, typewritten notes. VRG Archives.
- 6 Letter from Paul J. Howard to Virginia Robinson, June 26, 1961. VRG Archives.
- 7 Julia's remarriage to C. Walter (C. W.) Randolph Ford brought new possibilities and philanthropic engagements to the Robinson family. Julia and C. W. were active in supporting community projects and philanthropic endeavors, including La Fiesta de Los Angeles.
- 8 "Six Days She was Engaged," *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1903, 13.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 August 25, 1909. Harry applies for a passport; says he will be gone one year. During these years, according to Patty Elias, "Harry was being trained in all things to better run the store. Hence his travels were often related to studying or investigating a trade or a craft. He often traveled to compare J.W. Robinson to the other leading luxury department stores. Handwritten note from Patty Elias to Steven Keylon as part of The Virginia Robinson Gardens HALS review, July 2022.
- 11 Los Angeles *Graphic*, November 26, 1910. It's unclear why this article refers only to Mrs. Dryden, when her husband Nathaniel was still alive and would soon design the Robinsons' home.
- 12 "Salute the First Home in Beverly Hills," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, August 22, 1971, D1.
- 13 "Mrs. Harry L. Robinson," unmarked clipping, ca. 1974. VRG Archives. The story would change as it was retold. One account had them lost looking for a party at the Los Angeles Country Club, but it hadn't been completed yet. The club opened at its new location in Beverly Hills on May 30, 1911. For alternate versions of this story, also see: "A First Lady," *Society West*, Volume 1, Number 1, 1975, 12; "Salute the First Home in Beverly Hills," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, August 22, 1971, D1.
- 14 <https://thelegendarystatesofbeverlyhills.com/blogs/excerpts/19265220-elden-way-robinson-gardens>, accessed June 14, 2022.
- 15 *Golden Ghetto*, 100.
- 16 Contract, 1911. VRG Archives.
- 17 "Salute the First Home in Beverly Hills," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, August 22, 1971, D1.
- 18 Leslie C. Brand's style of entertaining also influenced Virginia, who would host weekly luncheons and intimate dinners, as well as regular large dinner parties. Thank you to Marcella Ruble for pointing this out.
- 19 Letter from Helen Hewitt Dryden to Virginia Robinson, July 11, 1911. VRG Archives. Thank you to Patty Elias for bringing this to my attention.
- 20 "Events in Local Society," *Los Angeles Daily Times*, September 13, 1911, 6.
- 21 Notice in *Southwest Contractor and Manufacturer*, February 11, 1911, 8. VRG Archives; "New Residences," *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1911, 12.
- 22 "Ellyn Byrens," *Beverly Hills Courier*, June 26, 1970, 2.
- 23 "A House of Love, Rest, Peace," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner California Living*, June 9, 1974, 32.
- 24 "Mrs. Harry L. Robinson," ca. 1974, clipping. VRG Archives.
- 25 "Her Home Marks 50th Year," *Los Angeles Herald & Express*, August 7, 1961, C6.
- 26 Detail noted in 1924 Dodd & Richards book of specifications for the pool, dressing rooms, and upper tennis court addition of 1925.
- 27 "A Lively Heirloom in a Jet Age," *Los Angeles Times Home Magazine*, April 27, 1969, 47.
- 28 Because female servants had rooms adjacent to the kitchen in the main house, it is presumed this cottage was for male servants.
- 29 *LASCA News*, May 1974, 2.
- 30 Entry in Virginia Robinson's diary for the day Taufer died in 1933. VRG Archives.
- 31 In color home movies of a birthday party thrown in the garden for Virginia's mother, Helen Dryden, in the mid-1930s, Tony Boggio is seen warmly greeting Mrs. Dryden. He became a vital part of Virginia Robinson's inner circle, even more important after the death of her husband in 1932. By 1930, Boggio's son Tony, Jr. worked as a buyer at J.W. Robinson's, later moving up to superintendent and executive with the company. This information comes from Census records and Boggio's obituary in the *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 1985.
- 32 Boggio and Benedetti were head gardeners overseeing a crew of six to twelve gardeners, depending on the season or year. According to "A Walk Through the Gardens, Part Two" (an undated typewritten document in the Virginia Robinson archives), "plants had to be hand-watered using hose pipes and hose-end sprinklers."
- 33 "Mrs. Harry L. Robinson," ca. 1974, clipping. VRG Archives.
- 34 "Salute the First Home in Beverly Hills," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, August 22, 1971, D1.
- 35 Dodd & Richards' blueprints, dated September 19, 1924. Permit dated January 14, 1925: "Foundation Only," 56' x 28,' Clark Cement & Concrete Construction Company. Permit dated January 20, 1925: "Dressing Rooms. Dodd & Richards, architects; G. M. Fletcher, contractor." In 1914, Harry hired architect William Richards (1871-1945) and the two visited department stores on the East Coast to get ideas for the design of a new, state-of-the-art store. Along with architect Frederick Noonan, Richards designed the new J.W. Robinson's seven-story flagship store at West Seventh Street in downtown Los Angeles. The building had over nine acres of building floor space and cost \$1,000,000. It opened in 1915. In 1916, William Richards partnered with the architect and engineer William J. Dodd (1862-1930). The pair would design some of Los Angeles' most iconic buildings (See Appendix: Biographies.)
- 36 Typewritten document, with notes on interview with Ivo. February 17, 1998. VRG Archives.
- 37 "A Lively Heirloom in a Jet Age," *Los Angeles Times Home Magazine*, April 28, 1969, 47.
- 38 Dodd & Richards specifications, 1924, 31. VRG Archives.
- 39 Her record book from 1940-41 shows dahlias and chrysanthemums, as well as iris bulbs, sourced from Howard & Smith Nursery. VRG Archives.
- 40 Dodd & Richards specifications, 1924, 31. VRG Archives.
- 41 "Her Home Marks 50th Year," *Los Angeles Herald & Express*, August 7, 1961, C6.
- 42 "Mrs. Harry L. Robinson," 1974, unidentified clipping. VRG Archives.
- 43 "Hunt Still on for Monkey Beverly Hills 'Peeping Tom,'" unidentified clipping. VRG Archives.
- 44 "Stray Monkey Gives Police 24 Hours of Difficulty," *Long Beach Sun*, November 9, 1932, 9.
- 45 Though the actual design of the garden is sometimes attributed to Charles Gibbs Adams, nothing conclusive was found in researching this HALS document that could substantiate that. References to Adams in relation to the Palm Forest begin to appear around 1974, at the time the estate was a promised gift to the Arboretum. Several articles at the time state that Adams helped the Robinsons in the decision to use tropical plants, including palms, and that Adams helped them get plants from the government, though what that refers to is unclear. Adams may have been involved in the garden's design for circulation, hardscape, and terracing. He often worked with the architects Dodd & Richards (he created the Italian-inspired landscape for Dodd's own home), and especially in the Italian Terrace Garden, one can see links to other gardens designed by Adams; but no permits or plans exist, nor records of payments made to Adams (or any other landscape architect). (See Appendix: Biographies, and see the Italian Terrace Garden in this section for additional information on Adams.)
- 46 The Robinsons sourced plants from several nurseries during this period, but primarily from Carl Purdy in Ukiah, and the City and the Kentia Nurseries in Santa Barbara, run by the Verhelle brothers. Nursery catalogs, typewritten 3"x5" cards. VRG Archives.
- 47 The earliest evidence of the Robinsons buying a king palm is a 3x5 typewritten card from September 10, 1930, for one *Archontophoenix alexandrae* from the Royal Palm

Nursery in Ocala, Florida. This differs from the *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*. *Archontophoenix alexandrae* is taller, has a more swollen base, and has a silvery rather than green undersurface on the leaflets. The flowers of *A. alexandrae* are greenish white to cream-colored, while those of *A. cunninghamiana* are pink to lavender. (<http://idtools.org/id/palms/palmid/factsheet.php?name=9395>)

48 "Harry W. Robinson Dies After Months' Illness," *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, September 23, 1932, clipping. VRG Archives.

49 "Harry W. Robinson Dies," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1932, clipping. VRG Archives.

50 Permit: Feb 14, 1929: Billiards room. Dodd & Richards, architects; John W. Akroyd, contractor. VRG Archives.

51 "Mrs. Harry L. Robinson," ca. 1974, unidentified clipping. VRG Archives.

52 "A Lively Heirloom in a Jet Age," *Los Angeles Times Home Magazine*, April 28, 1969, 47.

53 Cran, Marion. *Gardens in America*. Herbert Jenkins Limited, London, 1931, 127-128.

54 *Golden Ghetto*, 100.

55 "Harry W. Robinson Dies After Months' Illness," *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, September 23, 1932, clipping. VRG Archives.

56 "Fears Felt for Life of Store President," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, July 28, 1932, 5.

57 Virginia Robinson's 1932 diary. VRG Archives.

58 "Rites For Robinson in Garden," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 1932, clipping. VRG Archives.

59 This information was told to Marcella Ruble by Barbara Hines, Helen Chapman's granddaughter. Steven Keylon interview with Marcella Ruble, June, 2022.

60 Posthumous letter from Virginia Robinson to Harry Robinson, November 8, 1932. VRG Archives.

61 Ibid, December 16, 1932.

62 Bauer's naturalization papers. <https://www.ancestry.com/>

63 Wagner, Walter. *Beverly Hills: Inside the Golden Ghetto*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1976, 101.

64 Virginia Robinson diary. VRG Archives.

65 Posthumous letter from Virginia Robinson to Harry Robinson, September 13, 1933. VRG Archives.

66 "Virginia Robinson, Ex-Chairman of Robinson's Stores, Dies at 99," *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 1977, 21.

67 "Mrs. Harry Robinson Known Widely as Perfect Hostess," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1934, 41.

68 Posthumous letter from Virginia Robinson to Harry Robinson, July 2, 1935. VRG Archives.

69 Typewritten notes from interview with Les Baxter, October 5, 1983. VRG Archives.

70 Virginia had professional photographs taken of the gardens, circa 1940, which show terracotta pots in this location. A 1962 Kodacolor print is the earliest photograph in the archives that shows the pair of lions. VRG Archives.

71 Permit pulled October 14, 1935: Install new fireplace; Permit October 17, 1935: Two steel balconies. Contractor W. J. Gray; Permit October 21, 1935: Tear out cabinets. Install new windows. Paint and lay floor. Window size increase. Contractor W. J. Gray. VRG Archives.

72 Typewritten document describing the gardens. VRG Archives.

73 In landscape architect Benjamin Morton Purdy's 1958 drawing, he identifies the species of juniper. VRG Archives.

74 Permit pulled July 12, 1954: Kitchen remodeled. Western Kitchens. "Remove existing wood cabinets in auxiliary kitchen. Replace with Youngstown Steel Cabinets. Construct wood cabinet for built-in oven and furnish same. No structural changes." VRG Archives.

75 *Golden Ghetto*, 192.

76 Employment ledgers. VRG Archives.

77 "Salute the First Home in Beverly Hills," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, August 22, 1971, D2.

78 BENJAMIN MORTON PURDY (1888-1964): Landscape architect; Designed final changes to the VRG landscape in 1958

Benjamin Morton Purdy was born October 31, 1888, in Ballston Spa, New York, to Edward J. Purdy (1859-1930) and Nellie A. Ten Eyck (1864-1891). The 1900 census lists his father Edward as a nurseryman, while the 1905 New York State Census lists Edward Purdy as a "landscape engineer." By 1910, the census records indicate Edward was working as a "commercial traveler," while son Benjamin, age twenty-one, was working as a "laborer."

On May 29, 1914, Purdy married Ruth B. Partridge (1895-1966) in Schenectady, New York. Shortly after that, his World War I draft card lists his occupation as, "head stock clerk," for General Electric in Schenectady. On October 12, 1918, Purdy was inducted as a Private with the 808 Aero Squadron - Repair and was discharged just a few months later, on December 27, 1918.

Nothing is known of Purdy's life in the 1920s. He divorced his wife Ruth after World War I and moved to Southern California.

Around 1928, he met Marie "Louise" Bergin (1886-1966), the estranged wife of millionaire Charles B. Bergin, the heir to the Los Angeles Soap fortune. After her divorce, Purdy and Louise were married.

It isn't known how or why Purdy became a landscape designer. No records were found indicating he studied or

apprenticed anywhere. However, by 1930, at perhaps the worst time to open such a practice, he opened an office and began working as a landscape architect..

After World War II, Purdy either retired or his projects weren't published. He died in Beverly Hills in 1964; his wife Louise died in 1966.

79 "Salute the First Home in Beverly Hills," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, August 22, 1971, D2.

80 Ibid.

81 Drawings for terrace and great lawn circulation by Benjamin Morton Purdy, dated September 5, 1958. VRG Archives.

82 "Salute the First Home in Beverly Hills," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, August 22, 1971, D2.

83 "An Almost-Secret Garden in L.A.," *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 1993.

84 Typewritten notes from interview with Les Baxter, October 5, 1983. VRG Archives.

85 "Virginia Robinson Gardens," *LASCA Leaves*, September/October 1981, 1.

86 Sigg, Eric. *California Public Gardens: A Visitor's Guide*, John Muir Publications; New York, N.Y., 107.

87 Leslie C. Brand, Virginia's uncle, donated his estate to the city of Glendale, but the gift wasn't implemented as he planned. Virginia had to fight to give effect to her uncle's wishes and, as a result, this made her cautious and meticulous in the planning of the donation of her own estate. Steven Keylon interview with Marcella Ruble, June 2022.

88 February 22, 1974, Letter from Arthur G. Will, Chief Administrative Officer, to County Board Supervisors, Mrs. Robinson, Mr. McConnell, and the city of Beverly Hills. VRG Archives.

89 Letter from Virginia Robinson to James S. Mize, March 18, 1974. VRG Archives.

90 "Virginia Robinson Estate to Become Botanical Garden," *California Arboretum Foundation Newsletter*, May 1974, 2.

91 Most documents in Virginia's papers (birth certificate, marriage certificate, life insurance, passports etc.) list her birthdate as September 21, 1878. However most census and other records list her birthdate as September 21, 1877, as does her headstone. Thank you to Miya Taguchi for reaching out to the Missouri and Massachusetts Vital Records archivists, and settling these dates. VRG Archives.

92 "Annual Bowling on the Green," *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1978, 44.

93 Typewritten remembrances from Ivo. Archives of The Virginia Robinson Gardens (VRG archives).

94 "Virginia Robinson Gardens," *LASCA Leaves*, September/October 1981, 1.

BOOK REVIEW

Mendocino Refuge: Lake Leonard & Reeves Canyon By Dot Brovarney

Book Review by *Janet Gracyk*

In her new book *Mendocino Refuge: Lake Leonard & Reeves Canyon*, author and historian **Dot Brovarney** guides readers along a journey that began with a mysterious trunk of letters and photographs. Impressively diligent and lengthy sleuthing ensues, aided by serendipitous encounters. Brovarney's conversational style and generous detail immerses her audience in her discoveries and revelations.

Any fan of history and research will recognize the joy in seemingly chance coincidences that lead to vital details and will appreciate the care with which Brovarney treats her subjects. The structure of the book reflects what any researcher experiences – information is gathered, sorted, and gradually woven into an engaging story of a time and place.

Through this tale, readers come to know secluded Lake Leonard and steep, wooded Reeves Canyon in central Mendocino County. Brovarney traces the complicated comings and goings of early settlers, and the boom-and-bust era of logging and mining. The area remained mostly free of catastrophic damage during this time when schemes fell apart, but also due to the considerable effort of family owners who chose to steward their land.

Two women in particular stand out. Although Una Boyle Nuñez and Hazel Dickinson Putnam were separated by a 10-year difference in age, they knew each other growing up, spending long summers in the canyon and on the lake. They remained connected by a deep appreciation for poetry and horses, as well as their devotion to this remote part of Mendocino County – to the trees, the land, and the fauna that depended on the place.

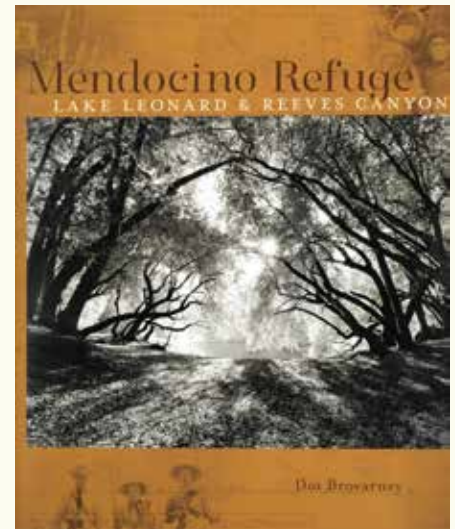
Nuñez's parents lived in San Rafael and were financially comfortable. They purchased 400 acres at the lake in 1885 to use as a family summer retreat. The location seems distant today and would

have been quite remote then. Even so, Una settled at the lake in 1921, at the age of 31, crafting a life that required courage, resilience, and a stubborn streak. She lived in this rustic retreat for thirty years.

Nuñez studied her surroundings and established correspondence with a University of California scientist, Dr. Tracy Storer. She tried raising sheep, with little success, and kept innumerable animals. Her letters and poetry display her bright and enquiring mind, creative wordplay, and joy in her surroundings. While sometimes strained by her limited finances and health challenges, Nuñez clearly enjoyed a deeply satisfying life, tucked into her cabin next to Lake Leonard.

Hazel Dickinson Putnam's father established his medical practice in Ukiah in 1899, the year Hazel was born. The family soon moved to San Jose. The Dickinsons kept roots in Mendocino County, having purchased several hundred acres in Reeves Canyon where they could retreat to a rustic cabin (with an outdoor kitchen) during hot San Jose summers. Dickinson Putnam became an expert horsewoman, riding competitively and giving riding lessons. Later in life, Hazel and her husband, Harry Putnam, retired to the Dickinson family land in Reeves Canyon where they lived for many years.

The story of land stewardship extends to the 1953 purchase of the Nuñez lake property by Dick and Susanna Bryant Dakin. Land near the Nuñez and Dickinson properties was logged, and some logging occurred on the Dickinson property to ease a financial burden, but the Dakin property was largely preserved. Dick and Susanna purchased additional property after their initial purchase to save more grand trees. Susanna was a historian with a particular passion for California, for the history of Native Americans, and the history of the arrival of the early settlers. After Dick and Susanna's deaths, family members acquired



more land. Eventually, 3850 acres were placed by the family into a land trust in 1998. The property also shares a 3.5-mile boundary with Montgomery Woods Natural Reserve, significantly expanding wildlife corridors.

In the chapter "Listen to the Land: Native Voices and Sacred Places," Brovarney attempts to explore pre-settlement uses and attitudes about Lake Leonard and Reeves Canyon. She approaches the subject with sensitivity. Refreshingly, she includes her own difficulties with the research and topic. The subsequent chapter describes colonization of the valley and the devastating impact on local tribes.

The book is a great example of a history that is specific to a small region in Northern California but transcends the local market. This compelling story about a canyon in Mendocino is further elevated by excellent writing and a generous number of photographs and maps. Aside from being a satisfying record of a time and place, the book will be enjoyed by that anyone interested in biography and California's history.

Members in the News

SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS DEVOTED TO TREES ARBORETUM CEO RICHARD SHULHOF RETIRES

(Note: When Los Angeles County Arboretum and Botanic Garden CEO Richard Schulhof recently retired, the following letter was sent to Arboretum members. We reproduce it here).

To complete a career in devotion to trees has been my great privilege. I retire this week, and as a parting message, reach out to you about these remarkable life forms that are so essential to human communities and much of life on earth. As the Arboretum celebrates its 75th anniversary this year, no subject bears more relevance to our historic mission.

In an age distinguished by short attention spans and near-term thinking, the work of an arboretum must steadfastly take the long view. Consider that seventy years ago, soon after our founding, we planted a sycamore fig (*Ficus sycomorus*) atop Tallac Knoll. In choosing the most prominent place in our landscape, Arboretum horticulturists of the day predicted the young sapling would grow into a landmark tree.

They were right. Today, this fig ranks among the finest specimens of its kind in North America, with a canopy spanning over 70 feet. Walk up to Tallac Knoll and stand beside its massive form. You will sense its enduring resilience, the continuing vigor of its growth, and you may also find

yourself thinking about the wisdom behind its planting.

Since the early 1950s, we have planted tens of thousands of trees. Each one, chosen through a highly deliberate process, may live for decades, years or months, depending on a range of conditions.

But the ceaseless planting of new generations of trees reflects the far-sighted view that defines us. Newly planted specimens will serve visitors we can never know, just as many of the trees we now enjoy are the gifts of long-past Arboretum staff.

Each tree we plant is an act of faith. We hope that skilled horticultural care, and the

cooperation of nature, will nurture a specimen that can dazzle, inspire, and teach. Of course, we can never be sure. Such is the work, the frustration and reward of growing the earth's longest-lived organisms.

Most importantly, we grow these trees for you. I have deeply valued your support as testimony that human appreciation for the arboreal world will never diminish, and that our exceptional collection of trees, ever changing and diverse, will always be treasured.

Yours, in devotion to trees,
Richard Schulhof



ANN SCHEID AWARD ANNOUNCEMENT

CGLHS is proud to announce an award presented to one of our long-time board members, Ann Scheid. After decades of devoted preservation work, she was awarded the 2023 Preservation Award by the City of Pasadena's Historic Preservation Committee, for "Grassroots Preservation Efforts by an Individual". The event was held at the beautiful and elegant Langham Huntington Hotel on Thursday, May 25, 2023.

Ann's impact on Pasadena history and preservation is wide-reaching - from the early architectural survey, to writing *Historic Pasadena; An Illustrated History, Pasadena*, to holding the position of archivist for the Greene and Greene archives at the Huntington Library for over twenty years. Her now great passion is to work to preserve the great historic street trees of Pasadena.

— Libby Simon



CALIFORNIA GARDEN
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HISTORY SOCIETY

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Address Correction and Forwarding Requested



Front Cover: Virginia and Harry Robinson enjoy the small bathing pool at their new Beverly Hills estate in June 1913. Photograph courtesy Virginia Robinson Gardens Archive.

Back Cover: The Pool Pavilion at the Robinson estate, designed by architects Dodd & Richards in 1924, with an addition in 1929. Photograph courtesy Dennis Hill, Content Creation.