

Ralph Tallant Stevens (1882-1958): *Excerpt from Post/Hazeltine Associates. Historic Structures/Sites Report for 2112 Santa Barbara Street. City of Santa Barbara Archives. Community and Development.*

Ralph Tallant Stevens, following in his horticulturalist's father's footsteps, R. Kinton Stevens (c. 1849 - 1896), exhibited an early interest in garden design. Born in Montecito at Tanglewood, his parents' estate and nursery on December 15, 1882, Stevens received his formal education at Michigan Agriculture College (subsequently, Michigan State University). There he obtained a degree in landscape architecture in 1905 (Casa del Herrero, NRHPR, NPS National Historic Landmark Nomination Form: 2001: 41; and *The Independent*, April 13, 2010). Returning to Santa Barbara in 1907 after a trip to Europe and brief stints in O. C. Simonds' landscape firm in Chicago, and at a firm in San Francisco, Stevens began work for landscape architect Peter Riedel's Southern California Acclimatizing Association. He then left to teach landscape design at the University of California, Berkeley, returning once again to Santa Barbara in 1917, this time permanently to open his own landscaping office (NRHPR, NPS nomination form, : 41). In that same year he took a second job as the City of Santa Barbara's first salaried Superintendent of Parks, serving in this position until 1921. For a brief period, between 1921 and 1922, Lockwood de Forrest, who would go on to be one of the most important American landscape designers in the early to mid-twentieth century, worked in Stevens' office. After leaving his salaried position as Superintendent of Parks, Stevens continued to serve as an unpaid Parks Commissioner and landscape architect for the city until shortly before his death in 1958. His work for the city during this 37-year period included the landscape designs for portions of Franceschi Park, Alameda Park, Oak Park, the Bird Refuge, and Plaza del Mar, as well as the plantings along Cabrillo Boulevard, and the grounds of the city's downtown public library and the Mesa Campus of Santa Barbara State College (now Santa Barbara City College). Ralph Stevens was a visionary landscape architect who like, Francisco Franceschi and Lockwood de Forrest, would employ indigenous, native flora set within a naturalistic setting then integrate it with more traditional plantings laid out in a formal Beaux Arts scheme. Many of these designs were for private, residential commissions, such as Far-A-Field, in Montecito and in Santa Barbara, the property at 2112 Santa Barbara Street. Like many of his other works, the property at 2112 Santa Barbara Street reflected his interest in combining both formal and informal garden elements. A series of parterres outlined with boxed hedges planted with roses and other flowering annuals and perennials were located on a secondary cross axis near the south end of the south vista. Hardscape features included axially-aligned brick pathways, pergolas, and a wall fountain (Appendix B, Sheet L 1). An overall plan of the garden is depicted on aerial photographs taken in 1928 and 1943 (Figures 3 &4).

The landscape historian, David Streatfield considers Ralph Stevens one of the important contributors to California's heritage of landscape architecture during the late teens through the 1930s (Streatfield, 1994: 221-222). During this period his major commissions, which included the property at 2112 Santa Barbara Street, were usually characterized by a synthesis of formal landscape features such as terraces, vistas, parterres, fountains, pergolas, and in some cases, sculptures that provided a formal setting for the house. These were surrounded by more naturalistic plantings that incorporated existing large trees. The planting palette was often characterized by an extensive use of Mediterranean and/or subtropical shrubs and trees set within a more

informal setting of trees. Some of his most notable commissions in Santa Barbara and Montecito, in addition to the landscaped gardens at 2112 Santa Barbara Street, included the estate gardens of Far-Afield (1917); Cuesta Linda (c. 1918); Casa del Herrero (1925); Las Tejas (c. 1925-30); and Cuatro Vientos (1929). Stevens later returned to Cuesta Linda, which was renamed Lotusland following its purchase by Gonna Walska in 1946 to design the Blue Garden, the outdoor theater, and the ground clock. His non-residential commissions included the grounds of the Biltmore Hotel, Santa Barbara (1926-27) and the landscaping of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, Hawai'i (1926).

Like his design for the property at 2112 Santa Barbara Street, aesthetically Stevens' gardens can be grouped with other Southern California gardens of the period that drew their inspiration from Mediterranean and the Middle Eastern antecedents. Included among these were Montecito estates, such as El Fureidis, the Persian-inspired garden designed by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue in 1903; Las Tejas, a Renaissance-inspired garden designed by Helen Thorne in 1916; and the Willis Ward garden designed by Francis Underhill in 1916 (Streatfield 1994: 104-151). These gardens all featured a landscape arranged along extended axis that visually linked the garden with the surrounding landscape. In most cases distant landscape features, such as the Santa Ynez Mountains or the nearby Pacific Ocean provide terminuses that extended the garden to the horizon. The design vocabulary of these landscapes were generally drawn from Classical European antecedents and often featured direct references to classical architecture such as Tuscan style columns, statuary, or water features. These classically-inspired landscape features were usually enmeshed in a larger more naturalistic designed landscape that drew its inspiration from English gardens of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Later in his career, as in the case of the Warren Tremaine house in Montecito (1948), Stevens exhibited his facile ability to change aesthetic directions. A Modernist house designed by the International Style architect, Richard Neutra, Stevens proved to be Neutra's Modernist equivalent; his use of succulents, grasses, and indigenous plantings set in an informal, naturalistic setting provided a perfect foil to the geometric simplicity of the house. In contrast to his pre-war commissions which were usually focused on large estate-size gardens, his post World War II commissions, like the Tremaine garden, were modest in scale. This was, no doubt, a reflection of changed economic conditions which made the maintenance of large properties that once characterized estates before World War II beyond the means of all but the wealthiest. In 1957, in honor of Stevens' contributions to the community the City of Santa Barbara changed the name of San Roque Canyon Park to Stevens Park in recognition of his 50-year career as a horticulturalist and 40-year association with the city's park system. Ralph Stevens died a year later, in 1958.