

**HISTORIC LANDMARKS COMMISSION
HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE REPORT
618 Sierra Street
Santa Barbara, California**

Prepared by Nicole Hernandez, MFA, City Architectural Historian,

Designation Status: Added to the Historic Resources Inventory on January 29, 2014 by HLC vote as it was found significant in the Lower Riviera Survey of Historic Resources

Assessor Parcel Number: 025-404-006

Constructed: 1927

Architect: N/A

Architectural Style:
Spanish Colonial Revival

Property Type: Single family residence

Original Use: Single family residence

Property Description: 618 Sierra Street is an asymmetrical, two-story Spanish Colonial Revival residence with a complex, low-pitched, terracotta roof consisting of two front facing gables projecting from a side gable in the center that covers the front entrance. Each front gable features vents under the gable peak. The first floor, chimney, garage, and steep steps to the front porch are all clad in sandstone that contrasts with the smooth stucco of the second floor. The front porch

railing over the garage has the unique pier and cap wall sandstone railing that characterizes much of the surrounding Lower Riviera neighborhood. The use of the stone continues on the west side elevation as it covers the dominate chimney and the side porch which also has a pier and cap wall railing. Under each gable is a triptych window of a large, fixed window flanked by single light, wood casement windows. Sets of wood casement windows with a projecting sill characterize the other elevations. The front entrance is at the top of the steep sandstone staircase and has a pair of wood,



Front Elevations of 618 Sierra Street,
Photos taken August 6, 2022 by Nicole
Hernandez

divided light French doors that were typical wood door patterns in the 1920s in Santa Barbara as well as similar a door on either side of the porch leading to the kitchen and living room.

Historic Significance:

Significance: City of Santa Barbara establishes historical significance as provided by the Municipal Code, Section 30.157.025. Any historic building that meets one or more of the criteria established for a City Landmark, or a City Structure of Merit can be considered significant. The structure may be significant as a Structure of Merit per the following criteria:

Historic Integrity

618 Sierra Street is in excellent condition. The building conveys integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association by conveying an example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style with significant sandstone detailing in Santa Barbara. The structure, sandstone railing and detailing and remain largely unchanged and convey their original 1924 appearance.

Criteria 3. It embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, architectural style or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic or historic value, or represents a significant and distinguishable collection whose individual components may lack distinction;



Front porch opening with divided light French doors. August 6, 2022 by Nicole Hernandez



Front porch with openings and wood beam ceiling that leads out to pier and cap rail porch. August 6, 2022 by Nicole Hernandez



Above: Stone wall at the upper end of Sierra Street and Spanish Colonial Revival style houses along Sierra Street that characterize the setting of 618 Sierra Street. Photographs taken by Nicole Hernandez on November 3, 2022



Historic Context: 618 Sierra Street sits on the small one block long, Sierra Street that runs from Grand Avenue to Alameda Padre Serra, although it is only accessible from Grand Avenue due to the steep sandstone wall at the end of the street. The street is characterized by small one- and two-story houses in the reductive interpretation of the Spanish Colonial Revival style. The house sits behind 620 Sierra Street. The home was constructed in 1927. The first resident recorded living in the house in 1927 was Gorgonia Romero as per the 1927 City Directory. The house appears on the 1930 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map in its current location behind 620 Sierra Street. The home has undergone few alterations and retains most of its original elements.

Above: Stone wall front of 620 Sierra Street, with a view of 618 Sierra Street behind and 616 Sierra Street down the hill. Courtesy Google Maps.

This home is in the Lower Riviera neighborhood of Santa Barbara. Like its northern neighbor the Riviera, with which it has much in common, the Lower Riviera was long considered too arid and barren to settle. The high-on-the-hill Riviera hamlet reinvented itself as Santa Barbara's most alluring neighborhood over the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1909 the State of California selected Santa Barbara to be the site of a new Normal School, which evolved a few decades later into the University of California, Santa Barbara and relocated to unincorporated County land near Goleta. Local banker Charles Edwards volunteered 14 acres of his own land above Mission Santa Barbara, in what would become the Riviera. It was a major turning point for the City; after California accepted his land, Santa Barbara had to shore up sufficient transportation accommodations for students and faculty.



Side elevation with pier and cap rail sandstone porch and sandstone chimney. August 6, 2022 by Nicole Hernandez

The City extended the streetcar line from its Mission Santa Barbara terminus up into the Riviera (these tracks were later paved over as Alameda Padre Serra). In 1913 a group of investors called the Riviera Company incorporated the area for \$300,000 and purchased additional land nearby. The Riviera Company reimagined the neighborhood's entire character between 1920 and 1950 and was responsible for many of its most notable features: the planting of still-extant oak trees, the proliferation of terracing built by twentieth century Italian stonemasons, and strong encouragements (sometimes requirements) that residents construct terracotta-roofed, white-stuccoed Spanish Colonial Revival style homes. The Riviera Company insisted that lots be oriented so that no home would impair a neighbor's view. As a result, even to this day the Riviera offers unobstructed, panoramic views of downtown Santa Barbara to the east, the gleaming Pacific Ocean and distant Channel Islands to the south, and the Santa Ynez Mountains to the north.



Vicinity map, City of Santa Barbara Mapping and Analysis System. 2020



1930-31 Sanborn Map page 278,
 Illustrating 618 Sierra Street with the
 projecting front stone porch

The dominant landscape features of the Riviera area is an alluvial fan formed by Mission Creek and Sycamore Canyon Creek, upon which most of downtown Santa Barbara is built, and Mission Ridge, which extends from Santa Barbara Mission to Sycamore Canyon Road. The native vegetation consisted of a coastal sage community, with riparian and marshland plant communities bordering creeks and sloughs. Since the arrival of the Spanish over 200 years ago, human activity has virtually eliminated these habitats from what is now the Riviera neighborhood. The Riviera covers 634 acres and is serviced by public green spaces, including Franceschi Park and Hillside (Orpet) Park, which is bisected by Alameda Padre Serra and is divided between the Lower and Upper Riviervas. Institutional development includes two private schools, Marymount School at 2130 Mission Ridge

Road and Santa Barbara Middle School on Alameda Padre Serra. Residential development consists primarily of single-family houses set on large parcels, though there is some multi-residential housing, confined mostly to condominium developments. The majority of the housing stock in the Riviera was built between 1915 and 1975.

By the 1920s many of the houses in this portion of the Riviera included a small on-car garage, several of which clad in the native sandstone that distinguishes this lower Riviera portion of the City. With its visual and historical references to the City's Spanish and Mexican era heritage, the Spanish Colonial Revival style resonated especially deeply in Santa Barbara and was responsible in large measure for the transformation of the visual character of the community from a Victorian era town into an evocative celebration of Mediterranean inspired architecture. The style was especially appropriate for the Riviera neighborhoods whose steep topography, irregular layout of streets, prominent stonework, expansive views and lush landscaping provided a picturesque setting for clusters of white plastered houses capped by red-tiled roofs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Sierra Street and neighboring streets are dotted with Spanish Colonial Revival style houses. While there is some new construction it has not substantially altered the essential character of the streetscape which features an irregular layout of streets transecting Mission Ridge's steeply sloping lots providing views towards the Pacific Ocean. In addition to the roads, the subdivision's developers planted oak trees to enhance the area's barren slopes. Sandstone is extensively employed in the neighborhood for delineating roadway edging, retaining walls, steps and boundary walls. Built by Italian stone masons including John Antolini, Antonio Da Ros and Joe Sacconaghi, under the direction of Joseph Dover, the finely built walls, stairs parapets and piers have been one of the most characteristic features of the neighborhood since their construction.

Many of the houses in the Riviera Neighborhood were designed in reductive versions of various subtypes of the Period Revival movement. The modest interpretation of the Spanish Colonial Revival, such as this one, were constructed for modest income families moving into the Lower Riviera.

Spanish Colonial Revival Style: The property qualifies for criterion 3 as it embodies distinctive characteristics of the Spanish Colonial Revival architectural style. Although reductive in nature, many of the Spanish Colonial Revival style buildings in the Lower Riviera neighborhood and exemplifies the type of house constructed for middle class housing built in Santa Barbara in the 1920s. They were not architect designed but constructed using pattern books, many developed in the Small House movement of the 1920. Known for its Spanish Colonial Revival architecture, Santa Barbara owes much of its charm to the many thick plaster walls and clay tile roofs of this style. The various subtle details carved in wood or crafted in iron adds to the quality of the architecture and character of the city. Spanish Colonial Revival architecture will always be key to Santa Barbara's identity.

In 1916, Bertram Goodhue, author of a book on Spanish Colonial architecture, helped to kick-start the new Spanish Colonial Revival Style with his designs for the Panama-California Expo in San Diego. Until then, the only Spanish architecture had been based on Mission prototypes. Soon, however, architects and patrons began to look to Spain itself for detailed examples of the Spanish style.

Throughout the territories originally settled by Spain in the Southwest, as well as Texas and Florida, the Spanish Colonial Revival Style flourished. In Santa Barbara, it was championed by many architects including George Washington Smith, Lulah Maria Riggs, Winsor Soule, Reginald Johnson, William Edwards, and Joseph Plunkett.

Also key to the success of the Spanish Colonial Revival Style in Santa Barbara was the Plans and Planting Committee, through which Bernhard Hoffman, Pearl Chase, and others helped

to sway Santa Barbara towards a more unified architectural style based on the City's Spanish Colonial and Mexican past. After the 1925 Earthquake, much of this vision was realized in the rebuilding of State Street and the Pueblo Viejo area, from which Santa Barbara has received much of its beauty and notoriety.

The details of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture vary greatly depending on which period of Spanish architecture is being referenced. In Santa Barbara, the Andalusian vernacular (southern-Spanish farmhouse) was the key inspiration for the simplicity in detail found in much of the region's architecture. The Spanish Colonial Revival Style emphasizes the interplay of cubic volumes, patios, pergolas and verandas; each interpreted and redeemed by local architects or regions in their own oeuvre of the form, massing, and decorative treatments. In Santa Barbara, the Spanish Colonial Revival Style was exemplified by one of Santa Barbara's noted architects from the 1920s, George Washington Smith, who was one of the most popular architects in the United States.

Santa Barbara has examples of the Spanish Colonial Revival Style throughout the city from the distinct commercial buildings on State Street, to small homes and large homes and estates on the Riviera, to multi-family housing and hotels in the West Beach neighborhood along the waterfront.

The Spanish Colonial Revival style emphasized the interplay of cubic volumes, patios, pergolas and verandas; each interpreted and redefined by local architects or regions in their own oeuvre of the form, massing, and decorative treatments. This structure may qualify under Criterion 3 due to the following character-defining features:

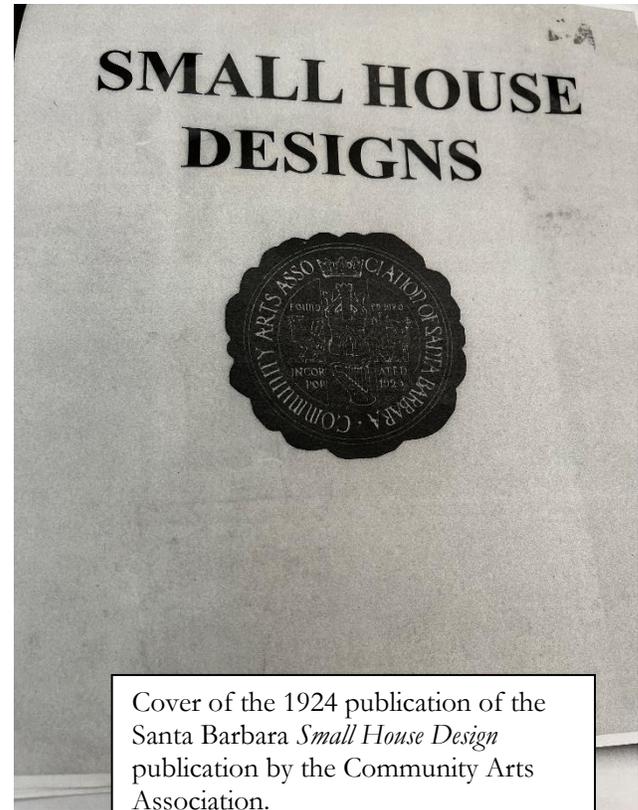
- **Roof:** The house at 618 Sierra Street features a low-pitched terracotta roof and symmetrical, u-shaped massing. The home has a central side gable flanked by two projecting front gables.
- **Cornice and Eave Details:** The terra cotta roof of the front facing gables create a shadow line on the smooth stucco walls; resulting in a decorative edge from the roof to the wall that is quintessential for the Spanish Colonial Revival style buildings. The roof has shallow overhanging eaves.
- **Porches and Balconies:** Front entries on Spanish Colonial Revival homes are often recessed in a deep wall opening. 618 Sierra Street features a recessed porch area underneath an extended portion of the side-gabled roof. This house is unique to Santa Barbara in that native material was incorporated and it also has the rough sandstone wall and stairs leading to a large porch over the garage with the stone pier and cap railing.
- **Wall Materials:** The Spanish Colonial Revival Style features smooth, whitewashed, planar, stucco walls, with the emphasis on broad, uninterrupted wall surfaces punctuated by a



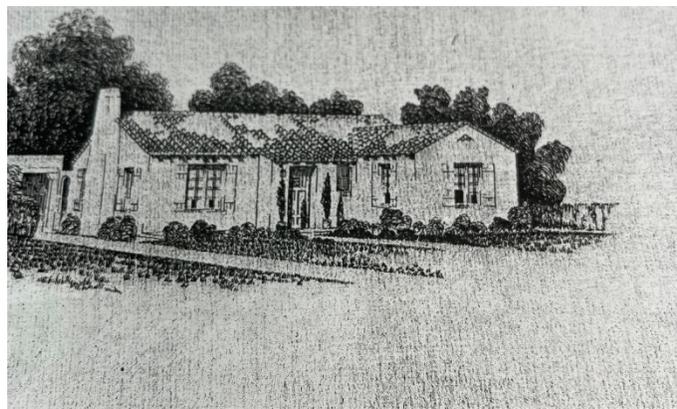
- careful use of openings that contrast to the native, rough sandstone walls, stairs and chimney.
- **Windows:** The home features large wood, single-pane windows flanked by single pane casement windows under each front facing gable. A pattern seen in many of the Spanish Colonial Revival style homes of the 1920s.
 - **Door Details:** The four, wood frame glass doors leading out onto the recessed front porch have divided light pattern that was often utilized in Santa Barbara in the 1920s.
 - **Chimney:** Tower like chimneys often adorn Spanish Colonial Revival style houses. In this case the chimney is distinguished with the native, sandstone cladding.

Small House Movement of the 1920s: The house is representative of the Small House Movement of the 1920s and embodies the distinctive characteristics of the quality small houses designed in the 1920s as part of the Better Homes in America movement nationally and locally in the Small House Design Competitions of the 1920s. In 1924, the Santa Barbara Community Arts Association published the book *Small House Design* that included floor plans and designs by architects for affordable small homes in Santa Barbara as the result of a design competition. Being that Santa Barbara purposefully encouraged Spanish Colonial Revival style, the book had a large section devoted to “Spanish- California Types” of small houses that allowed people of less financial means, than those building large estates by noted architects, like George Washington Smith, to build and live in a home reflecting the new identity of Santa Barbara and to continue to be a part of creating a Spanish/Mediterranean American Riviera that includes large estates, commercial buildings in the commercial districts and small homes, apartment buildings and bungalow courts.

As stated in the graduate thesis document “The Small House Movement of the 1920s: Preserving Small



Cover of the 1924 publication of the Santa Barbara *Small House Design* publication by the Community Arts Association.



One of the “Spanish Style Types” from the Santa Barbara *Small House Design* publication by the Community Arts Association. The extending front facing gable from the side gable with the clay tile vents and large window under the open gable are reflected in the design 618 Sierra Street.

“Better” Houses”, by Valerie Smith:

Access to architect-designed house plans became widespread in the 1920s and became its own movement as nationally, architects sponsored a small house service bureaus and stock plan companies began to emerge.

One such organization was originated and approved by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and was called the Architects’ Small House Service Bureau. The Architect’s Small House Service Bureau published an edition in 1929. The book *Authentic Small Houses of the Twenties* illustrates 254 homes and plans and is a republication of the *Small Homes of Architectural Distinction; A Book of Suggested Plans Designed by The Architects’ Small House Bureau, Inc.* The board of directors of AIA stated that they look at the work as the primary contribution to the improvement of the small-house architecture of this country. The edition was approved by Herbert Hoover, Secretary Department of Commerce, United States Government. The publication has several iterations of Spanish style houses called “In the Spirit of Old Spain, stating “the atmosphere of Andalusia lingers in this Spanish Colonial Revival home.



One of the “Spanish Colonial homes” featured in the 1929 edition of *Small Homes of Architectural Distinction; A Book of Suggested Plans Designed by The Architects’ Small House Bureau, Inc.* With features that are reflected in the 1930 design of 618 Sierra Street.

Valerie Smith continues in the Thesis, “The Small House Movement of the 1920s: Preserving Small “Better” Houses”:

Following on this idea (of The Architects’ Small House Bureau”, the National organizations, Better Homes in America began as a private organization in 1922 that "spearheaded a national campaign for domestic reform focused on educating homeowners about quality design and construction." Taking cues from the national movement, Santa Barbara’s own Community Arts Association’s Plans Committee was responsible for hosting many design competitions focused on small house design in the 1920s. In 1922, the Plans Committee held their first small house competition meant to "stimulate an interest in the community in more harmonious and artistic and fitting buildings and dwellings in Santa Barbara." Another competition was held in 1923 for houses costing less than \$5,000. In 1924, the Community Arts Association published sixty-two of the best designs in a book called *Small House Designs*. Like the plan books by the Architects’ Small House Service Bureau, the book made architect designs available to the public for a low cost. Santa Barbara’s Pearl Chase stated that the market for these plans was the middle class to

working class saying “One can go to an architect and secure the beauty of line in detail, so that is so essential for a perfect whole but the majority of persons can ill afford architectural service--or in some cases would not appreciate it if they could. This is the class we are trying to influence.” The book was edited by architects Carleton Monroe Winslow and Edward Fisher Brown and dedicated to Bernhard Hoffmann in recognition of his "devoted, far-sighted and generous leadership in promoting the development and enhancing the attractiveness of Santa Barbara." The Community Arts Association's architectural competitions and small house efforts received national attention and were even mentioned in the Better Homes in America guidebook: Some time before the Better Homes Campaign, the Community Arts Association held an extensive Small House Design Contest, and an exhibition was made of plans and models of houses and landscaping designs submitted. To follow up the work begun by the Association, and to emphasize the importance of attractive exteriors, the Committee printed a list of small houses in Santa Barbara as representative of the best to be found. This list was included in a local Guidebook distributed by the Committee. Santa Barbara's Plan committee drew much publicity and local newspapers wrote about how the small house efforts in Santa Barbara were a notch above other efforts and that "While other cities have followed the old plan of building houses according to mail 'order plans' or...stereotyped designs, Santa Barbara has been seeking to give the humble house the same individualization that marks the efforts or the more ostentatious structures."¹⁹⁹ In the magazine California Southland, it was noted that mistakes could be made when not using architect-designed plans for small houses, including materials, siting, interior plaster, selection of hardware and electronics, use of ornamentation, and exterior colors. California Southland acknowledged Santa Barbara's role in "teaching" good design but wrote a note of caution about the need for zoning and architectural control over bad designs: "Soon Santa Barbara will be outdistanced by her pupils if she does not stop building in ignorance and take to herself the lesson she has so nobly written in California's history." The Plans committee sought to "enhance the attractiveness of the city while encouraging affordable housing" which aligned perfectly with the goals of Better Homes in America. The Community Arts Association's Plans committee was responsible for the robust Better Homes campaigns each year and they set an example for other Southern California cities as well as the nation. The Plan committee's decision to involve architects in designing small houses brought their Better Homes campaigns national attention and helped propel the Small House Movement in Santa Barbara. Other cities were inspired by Santa Barbara and California Homeowner's editor wrote that Los Angeles hoped to promote Better Homes in America, but they faced organizational challenges and were in “no such position as Santa Barbara, where the Community Arts Association is thoroughly organized throughout the year for this sort of thing.” Local house competitions were held by the Plans and Planting committee a year before the upcoming Better Homes Weeks to identify houses that could be used as model houses. The houses submitted in the competitions were reviewed by local architects who were

involved in the judging process. The best houses were selected for the national Better Homes Week each year...

Santa Barbara was awarded prizes for their model house entries from 1925 to 1931. The model houses were diverse in size, material, and type. They were constructed of wood, brick, adobe, hollow tile, or stucco. Some houses used repurposed materials including brick and lumber to reduce building costs. The dwellings were primarily single-family houses, but a few small apartments were demonstrated. Three of the houses that won prizes in the local competition were remodeled barns, and another was a remodeled adobe house. This concept was in line with Better Homes guidelines since the remodeling of older



houses allowed farmers and others who did not have the funds to build new, to participate. Remodeling old structures also helped beautify cities which was a goal for Pearl Chase and Better Homes leaders. The house styles in Santa Barbara's campaigns were period-style including Cape Cod, Monterey Revival, Spanish Colonial Revival, Italian Revival, Tudor, and French cottage.

The house at 618 Sierra Street embodies characteristics of the houses found in the pattern books promoting the Spanish Style throughout the 1920s as part of the Small House movement of the 1920s, including the cross gables, terra cotta roofs and casement windows, that allowed quality smaller and moderate income housing to contribute the Spanish Colonial Revival identity of Santa Barbara..

Sandstone: The house is characterized by sandstone cladding over the basement floor, chimney, garage and pier and cap railings surround in the porch. As stated in *Images of America, Stone Architecture in Santa Barbara*, "Sandstone is a feature that gives the region distinction while offering a surprising and pleasing bit of artistry... As Santa Barbara's Mission Canyon was full of huge sandstone boulders that, in the hands of master stonecutters became beautiful a common material."

As the population in Santa Barbara grew, new residents recognized and appreciated the natural beauty and the natural materials. And utilized the local sandstone to building their homes. Sandstone became a vital part of Santa Barbara's emergence and provided the city with unparalleled tradition of stone architecture. As some of the wealthy estates and

buildings began employing stone in the architecture, the tradition became popular and was extended to the modest size residences and commercial buildings as well. Some of the first residences included 1900 Garden Street: El Nido Hopkins House constructed in 1897 by Francis Wilson. The stones were brought from Mission Canyon and left unsorted as to color to provide a rich appearance. An example of a Commercial building designed in sandstone is Arnoldi's restaurant, a Landmark located at 600 Olive Street.



As further noted in *Images of America, Stone Architecture in Santa Barbara*,

Sandstone construction in the Santa Barbara area dates back to the time when the Spanish first arrived. Since it was necessary to travel some distance into the woods to obtain lumber, whereas rocks were found scattered on the ground, stone became the preferred building material. The tradition of building with stones continued in Santa Barbara County through the 19th century. This method of construction was often



chosen because local brown sandstone was readily available and easy to transform from round or shapeless boulders into symmetrical smooth-faced stone for building purposes. A local stonemason explained in July of 1883, "When a quantity of it is wanted, a blast of powder is drilled into the heart of one of the large boulders and exploded and a number of square edged building stones are produced" (Santa Barbara News-Press July 1883). Many residences, walls, bridges, and commercial structures were constructed out of local sandstone during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Immediately after World War I, Santa Barbara began a concerted effort to revamp its visual image. During this time, city planners carefully monitored all construction of any new structure to make sure it was consistent with the master plan that was based on Spanish Colonial Revival/Mediterranean streetscape mode (Conrad and Nelson, 1986: 14). The use of a traditional building material, sandstone, in the construction of the walls built during this period was in line with Santa Barbara's planning and design efforts. In the years from 1870 to 1940, when Santa Barbara was quickly evolving into a vibrant, growing city, the period witnessed an extraordinary explosion of stone construction made possible by the abundant supply of sandstone, a cadre of expert

masons, and financing by private citizens. This period provided an atmosphere conducive to the building of public and private spaces of all kinds, walls, bridges, gardens, and an assortment of other stone works and encouraged some exceptional expressions of the mason's art. Among the most apparent expressions of the beauty in stone that give the region such distinction are the stone walls.

Architectural Historian Conclusion: The house is an original 1930 Spanish Colonial Revival style home that is representative of the type of houses encouraged by the Small House Movement of the 1920s and the planning leaders in Santa Barbara. The house has additional artistry and craftsmanship incorporated into the design with the use of the Santa Barbara native sandstone. The house retains the required historic integrity and meets Criterion 3 of the Santa Barbara Municipal Code to qualify to be designated a historic Structure of Merit.

Work Cited:

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