

WEST PORTAL BRANCH

West Portal

MONTHLY

Member of the San Francisco Neighborhood Newspaper Association (415) 731-6397 [www.westportmall.com/sftimes](http://www.westportmall.com/sftimes)

## The mysteries of Arden Wood

*Recent tree removal focuses local attention on expansion plans of Christian Science care facility*

by Stephen Abney

**A**rden Wood dominates the skyline of the West Portal neighborhood around 15th Avenue and Wawona Street. Its dramatic red tile Mansard roof and six chimney towers rise five stories above the blocks of single family homes that border it. Built in the style of a classic Norman chateau, one could imagine it nestled in the forests of the Loire Valley, the country estate of a wealthy, eighteenth century French aristocrat.

Seemingly displaced in both time and space, there is a natural mystery about Arden Wood. What is it and why is it there? Designed by noted architect Henry Gutterson (who also designed the Ninth Church of Christian Science next to Commodore Sloat School on Junipero Serra) and constructed in 1929-30 for approximately one million dollars, Arden Wood is the largest Christian Science care facility in the world. The sanatorium's original 120 bedrooms have been reconfigured and remodeled over the years.

According to chief Administrator Edward Sage, the property now provides 50 nursing beds for Christian Scientist patients. Approximately 40 rooms are used to house Arden Wood staff and nursing students.

About 15 rooms are reserved for Christian Scientists who come to Arden Wood for rest and study. These

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VOL. IX NO. VIII

P.O. BOX 27456 SF, CA 94127

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residential visitors come from all over the world to experience serenity and spiritual retreat in Arden Wood's unique environment of faith, prayer and healing. The public and common rooms, such as the main salon, chapel and dining area are consistent with the building's over all design. Large, spacious rooms with high ceilings appointed with French Provincial furnishings give the interior an air of elegance and dignity. On display are paintings, antiques and works of art donated by Arden Wood's international community of friends.

Ed Sage sees Arden Wood's mission as two-fold. First, it offers an environment that promotes healing through prayer. Secondly, it maintains a nursing school for the education of nurses who receive medical training in line with the tenets of Christian Science. Classrooms and training facilities are located on the building's lower levels.

The site originally was situated on 16 acres landscaped with gardens and trees. In 1975, the Boston-based Church of Christian Science sold the facility to a west coast Christian Science group, the Arden Wood Benevolent Associa-

tion. To help defray the cost of renovating the structure, four acres facing 19th Avenue were sold to developers who, despite resistance from open space advocates, build the Grove Condominiums on the land.

Its size and stunning architecture notwithstanding, Arden Wood has kept a low profile in the community carrying on its mission behind a sheltering buffer of trees and gardens. When some of the trees started coming down, neighbors became alarmed.

Arden Wood had previously maintained good relations with its neighbors. When the city proposed extending Highway 280 into the area, Arden Wood joined with a community coalition to block the project and preserve the quiet character of the neighborhood.

But recently, when large trucks and logging equipment appeared and commenced tree removal operations, word quickly spread that the site was being cleared for construction. Indeed, Arden Wood management had hired an architectural firm to draw up conceptual designs for a two-story, three wing nursing facility which would connect to the existing building.

The proposed site of the new facility on land adjacent to Wawona and 15th Avenue concerned nearby residents who feared that the park-like grounds

across from their homes would be transformed into an out of scale, institutional complex.

Neighborhood meetings were held. Concerns were voiced regarding impact, design, traffic, noise and possible reduction of property values. The biggest fear was, given the sudden and unannounced tree removals, the project would somehow be initiated without the community having adequate time to respond. Peter Goldstein, Karen Caldwell and other representatives from the neighborhood met with Edward Sage and Arden Wood administrators to discuss the issues.

Sage maintains that the tree removal was prompted by safety concerns and that the trees cut were old and diseased. Their removal was recommended and conducted by a professional arborist. According to Sage, the trees that were removed represent about one percent of the 5000 trees on the property and were culled from various surrounding areas, not just the proposed site of expansion.

Although Arden Wood denies the tree clearing had any connection to their expansion plans, skeptical neighbors have expressed doubts about the coincidental nature of the two projects.

Sage has further stated that plans for future construction and renovation are still in the early stages. Site and design are presently speculative. In a letter written to residents and in discussion, Sage has tried to reassure local homeowners that Arden Wood is sensitive to their concerns. He has promised to schedule meetings between neighbors and the facility's board of directors for direct and open communication.

At a recent meeting of West Portal residents, the majority of opinions expressed revealed a very guarded attitude towards plans for any future construction.

Within the halls of Arden Wood, the tasks of Christian Science education and healing continue to be the facility's priorities.