

Rivera Heights Historic District



Identified-Eligible for Listing in the California Register of Historical Resources

Historic District Summary

Prepared by the San Francisco Planning Department
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SAN FRANCISCO
PLANNING
DEPARTMENT



Rivera Heights Identified Eligible Historic District

- Contributor - 40
- Non-Contributor - 2

Rivera Heights Historic District

This historic district summary was prepared as part of the *Sunset District Residential Builders (1925-1950) Historic Context Statement* (context statement) and Sunset District Historic Resource Survey. Refer to the context statement for additional contextual information focused on the social, architectural, and development history of the neighborhood, the role of builders and architects, and the associated framework for evaluation.

Boundary: The identified-eligible Rivera Heights Historic District (District) is located in San Francisco's Sunset District neighborhood. The District comprises 42 buildings on the block bounded by 29th Avenue, 30th Avenue, Quintara Street, and Rivera Street.

Period of Significance: The period of significance is limited to 1936-1940, the years of construction and sales. The first houses were constructed in 1936, and the last house, which replaced a temporary sales office, was built in 1940.

Historical Resource Status Code: 3CD; Appears eligible for the California Register as a Historic District.

District Eligibility: Events (California Register Criterion 1) and Architecture (California Register Criterion 3).

District Contributors: 40 contributing buildings and 2 non-contributing buildings.

Summary of Significance

The identified-eligible Rivera Heights Historic District is significant for its association with the marketing efforts of McKeon's Happy Homes, specifically the naming of a new neighborhood, and for its unusual expression of Period Revival architectural styles which fused French Provincial and Mediterranean Revival design elements.

The District is a significant example of a full-block Period Revival residential tract developed by master builder Chris McKeon and represents a range of styles including what was described as "French Colonial." District buildings are distinctive for their unusual peaked roof forms and tripartite window configuration. The houses were advertised as "miniature chalets of France of the days of the monarchy," alluding to the then-popular trend in Period Revival styles that emulated European building forms and styles.² Many of these French-inspired "chalets" also featured red Spanish clay tile cladding at the roofs and parapets, resulting in an unusual merging of French Provincial and Mediterranean Revival-inspired styles. The five- and six-room houses also featured the new Patio Plan layout—described at the time as 'old-world' patios, further reinforcing the picturesque European imagery.³ The majority of buildings in the District were constructed in 1936 and 1937—a brief period that is notable for the full expression of picturesque Period Revival and Mediterranean Revival in the larger Sunset District—and most were sold immediately upon completion.⁴ Each building features a unique design incorporating elements associated with the Mediterranean Revival, Spanish Colonial Revival, French Provincial and/or Storybook styles. District buildings are distinctive and display a profusion of features not found on the typical Sunset District tract house including double peaked roof and parapet forms, sculpted walls, and ornamented entryways. Additional detailing expressed on

² "52 New Homes Being Erected," *San Francisco Chronicle*. April 1936

³ "First Rivera Residents," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 18, 1936

⁴ "52 New Homes Being Erected," *San Francisco Chronicle*. April 1936.

individual buildings includes towers, red Spanish clay tile roof cladding and accents, cartouches and applied ornament, blind niches, bulky columns and brackets, punched wall openings, balconettes, and miniature bell towers. District buildings reflect the unusual plan and massing of tract houses that emerged in the Sunset District beginning in the 1920s. Due to the narrow width of lots, tracts were tightly packed, with no visual separation between houses. Likewise, automobile garages were integrated into the ground story of houses, rather than constructed as a separate detached garage that was typical of other San Francisco Bay Area residential tracts. Living areas were located above the combined ground story garage and basement space. This early merging of automobile and living spaces was unusual for the time and resulted in a uniquely San Francisco landscape of nearly attached single-family houses with prominent ground-story garages.

Anchoring the District is an oversize corner lot on 29th Avenue at Rivera Street upon which is set a sprawling Storybook style house. Oriented toward the corner, the house is notable for its center turret, exaggerated mansard roof form, and use of rubble wall accents to suggest age. One of the first buildings constructed in the tract, the corner Storybook house provides a prominent point of entry to the new “Rivera Heights” neighborhood.

McKeon named the location of his new development “Rivera Heights” in reference to the street and topography on which it was located. It was an ambitious name for the site’s vacant sand dunes and scrubby grasslands. Nonetheless, McKeon capitalized on the hilly location and promoted the “sweeping views of the Marin shore on the north out to the Farallones and southward to the peninsula shores and beaches” to prospective house buyers.⁶ Although the District was located adjacent to a vast expanse of largely inaccessible sand dunes, McKeon promoted its easy accessibility to the City’s downtown core. He touted the close proximity to transit, such as the ‘municipal L cars’ along Taraval Street that would speed residents to downtown in just 29 minutes. Also advertised was a future bus line that would eventually connect Rivera Heights residents with the East Bay.⁷ At that time, the subject block, on 30th Avenue, terminated in sand dunes. Quintara Street was still impassable due to sand and would not be graded for several more years, delaying McKeon’s development of the northern portion of his tract (outside the District boundary) until the 1940s. Within a decade, however, the District was fully enveloped by newly developed residential tracts.

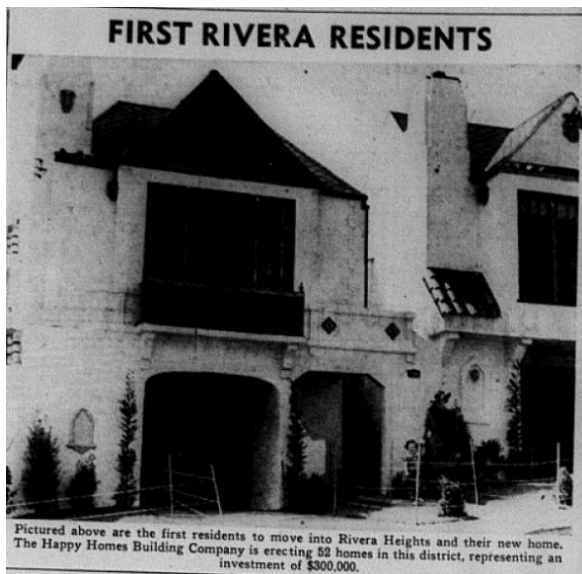
The branding of a new neighborhood, Rivera Heights, combined with the unusual fusion of Mediterranean and French Provincial design elements and marketing efforts promoting “Old World” imagery, are a result, in part, of McKeon’s efforts to market and sell houses constructed in a remote, windswept, and sand-covered nascent neighborhood. At that time, as the City emerged from the Great Depression and construction activity slowly gained momentum, these efforts were necessarily in order to attract the small, but growing pool of potential home buyers. Although the neighborhood is no longer known as Rivera Heights, the unusual building designs provide a tangible connection to this largely hidden era of residential tract design.

⁶ “52 New Homes being erected,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 1936.

⁷ Ken Zinns, *The Tradition Continued: The Sunset District Rowhouse, 1920-1945*, Master’s Thesis, 1983.



Above left: Detail of the District from a 1937-1938 aerial view, with the district boundary drawn in yellow. Above right: View of the larger Sunset District, much of it still covered by dunes and scrubby grasses. Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.



Above left: The first District house to be occupied, 2183 29th Avenue, was featured in the April 18, 1936 real estate section of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Above right: A contemporary view of 2183 29th Avenue.

Chris McKeon/ Happy Homes

The District is closely associated with builder Chris McKeon, owner of the Happy Homes Building Company. McKeon briefly lived in one of houses, 2163 29th Avenue, shortly after construction and established a sales office within the district on a sandy lot at the northeast corner of 30th Avenue and Rivera Street.⁸ McKeon's temporary residence is extant, though he replaced the sales office with a house in 1940.

⁸ "52 New Homes Being Erected," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 1936.

McKeon, a native San Franciscan raised in the Mission District, transitioned to residential development from a wholly unrelated field. Prior to his successful career as a builder, he worked as a butcher. McKeon's lack of experience in the construction and real estate industry is characteristic of Sunset District builders. Nonetheless, he emerged as a prolific and respected builder of residential tracts in the Sunset District and the wider San Francisco Bay Area. Like many Sunset builders, McKeon lived and worked in the neighborhood he helped develop, residing for a short time within the developing Rivera Heights tract and at his longtime home at 345 Santiago Street, in the Sunset District, where he resided from 1932 to 1948.⁹ The Happy Homes sales office was located on a corner lot in the identified District (on the lot that now holds 2194 30th Avenue) from 1936 to 1939. Based on the aerial view, it appears that the sales office consisted of a small one-story frame structure. In 1940, he relocated the Happy Homes sales office to nearby Taraval Street, where it remained until 1955.¹⁰

McKeon partnered briefly with S.K. Birdsall, co-owner of Happy Homes Building Company, prior to purchasing the firm in the mid-1930s. The Rivera Heights development was part of the firm's reported \$300,000 building program. Rapid sales enabled the firm to expand its building activities in the larger Sunset District neighborhood.¹¹ McKeon noted that hundreds of people visited the District's display model homes and sales office during the early development stage, and most were young married couples ready to buy their first house.¹² The District was developed at the cusp of the mass-development of the Sunset District, as facilitated by new Federal Housing Administration (FHA) mortgage innovations.

Refer to the *Sunset District Residential Builders 1925-1950 Historic Context Statement* for detailed contextual information regarding the neighborhood's development history, the role of Chris McKeon, stair and entrance typologies, the evolution of the Period Revival styles, and related character-defining features.



Left: Chris McKeon's temporary personal residence, 2163 29th Avenue, within the District.

Character-defining features:

Most buildings feature the "Patio Plan" interior courtyard, a sun-lit second story interior patio not visible from the street. Buildings are designed in the Storybook, Spanish Colonial Revival, Mediterranean Revival and a hybrid of the French Provincial and Mediterranean Revival styles. Character-defining features include:

- Uniform front yard setbacks of approximately 10'

⁹ San Francisco City Directories, 1930-1955.

¹⁰ City Directories and building permits variously list 940 and 948 Taraval Street.

¹¹ "Many Homes Started on Rivera Tract," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 25, 1936.

¹² "52 New Homes Being Erected," *San Francisco Chronicle*. April 1936.

- One-story over garage massing with deeply recessed garage openings
- Articulated façade massing with projecting and recessed bays
- Variety of stair and entry configurations including the transitional side stair and straight side stair, primarily with entry arch
- Variety of roof forms including gabled, side-gabled, cross-gabled, and an unusual peaked mansard roof form
- Prominent, sculpted chimney stacks
- Roofs clad in red Spanish clay tile and asphalt shingle
- Stucco exterior walls, roughly textured or smooth
- Tradesmen pedestrian door located within the recessed garage opening
- A variety of wood-sash windows and openings
 - Arched, squared, or sculpted window openings, some set in an unusual squared tripartite configuration, with robust turned wood mullions
 - Deeply recessed and chamfered window openings
 - Wood muntins in a variety of patterns
 - Casement windows with divided lights, often topped with divided light transoms
- Additional detailing expressed on individual buildings includes quoin patterns, sculpted walls, cartouches and applied ornament, vigas, blind niches, bulky columns and brackets, towers, punched wall openings, balconettes, and miniature bell towers

Integrity:

The District retains sufficient integrity to convey its architectural significance. Buildings retain their original massing, form, setback, and many original features including stucco cladding, stair and entry configuration, and ornamentation. Nearly all of the historic garage doors were replaced with contemporary doors and the District also shows a high percentage of replacement windows. Several buildings were altered extensively—including recladding at the exterior, replacement of historic roof materials, and stripping of ornament—which resulted in a loss of integrity and non-contributor status.

Sources

David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

San Francisco Assessor's Office, Sales Ledgers.

San Francisco Chronicle, "Many Homes Started on Rivera Tract," April 25, 1936.

San Francisco Chronicle, "52 New Homes Being Erected," April 1936.

San Francisco Chronicle, "First Rivera Residents," April 18, 1936.


San Francisco City Directories, 1930-1955.

San Francisco Department of Public Works, Central Permit Bureau, Building Permits.

San Francisco Planning Department. *Sunset District Residential Builders, 1925-1950, Historic Context Statement*, April 3, 2013.

Zinns, Ken, *The Tradition Continued: The Sunset District Rowhouse, 1920-1945*, Master's Thesis, 1983.

Rivera Heights Historic District

APN	Address	Photo	CHRSC
2188007	2127 29th Ave		3CD
2188008	2131 29th Ave		3CD
2188009	2135 29th Ave		6Z
2188010	2139 29th Ave		3CD
2188011	2143 29th Ave		3CD

Rivera Heights Historic District

APN	Address	Photo	CHRSC
2188012	2147 29th Ave		3CB
2188013	2151 29th Ave		3CD
2188014	2155 29th Ave		3CB
2188015	2159 29th Ave		3CD
2188016	2163 29th Ave		3CB

Rivera Heights Historic District

APN	Address	Photo	CHRSC
2188017	2167 29th Ave		3CD
2188018	2171 29th Ave		3CB
2188019	2175 29th Ave		3CB
2188020	2179 29th Ave		3CB
2188021	2183 29th Ave		3CB

Rivera Heights Historic District

APN	Address	Photo	CHRSC
2188022	2187 29th Ave		3CD
2188023	2199 29th Ave		3CB
2188025	1924 Rivera St		3CD
2188026	1930 Rivera St		3CD
2188027	1950 Rivera St		3CD

Rivera Heights Historic District

APN	Address	Photo	CHRSC
2188028	2190 30th Ave		3CD
2188029	2186 30th Ave		3CD
2188030	2182 30th Ave		3CD
2188031	2178 30th Ave		3CB
2188032	2174 30th Ave		3CD

Rivera Heights Historic District

APN	Address	Photo	CHRSC
2188033	2170 30th Ave		3CB
2188034	2166 30th Ave		3CD
2188035	2162 30th Ave		3CD
2188036	2158 30th Ave		3CD
2188037	2154 30th Ave		3CD

Rivera Heights Historic District

APN	Address	Photo	CHRSC
2188038	2150 30th Ave		3CD
2188039	2146 30th Ave		6Z
2188040	2142 30th Ave		3CD
2188041	2138 30th Ave		3CD
2188042	2134 30th Ave		3CD

Rivera Heights Historic District

APN	Address	Photo	CHRSC
2188043	2130 30th Ave		3CD
2188044	2126 30th Ave		3CD
2188045	2122 30th Ave		3CD
2188046	2116 30th Ave		3CD
2188047	2114 30th Ave		3CD

Rivera Heights Historic District

APN	Address	Photo	CHRSC
2188048	2110 30th Ave		3CB
2188049	2106 30th Ave		3CD