



HISTORIC SITE PRESERVATION BOARD STAFF REPORT

DATE: April 10, 2018

DISCUSSION

SUBJECT: CASE 3.1074 – HISTORIC LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FRANCES STEVENS PARK AND SCHOOL, A CLASS 1 HISTORIC SITE (HSPB #7) LOCATED AT 538 NORTH PALM CANYON DRIVE (ZONE "O") (KL)

FROM: Department of Planning Services

SUMMARY

In the fall of 2017, the City's Facilities Maintenance Department, in an effort to respond to public complaints regarding the park's deteriorated landscape prior of the start of the tourist season, installed a scattering of various drought tolerant plants and "terra cotta red" decomposed granite in various perimeter areas of the park. Concern about the visual appearance of this installation was brought to the HSPB and on December 12, 2017, the HSPB reviewed the installation and directed staff to:

1. Inventory the extant plant material, particularly the trees and land forms.
2. Review the original landscape design for the park.
3. Return with a landscape master plan appropriate to the historic period of significance that the City could implement in phases over time.
4. Submit the recently installed landscape changes to the City's Architectural Review Committee ("AAC") for a recommendation to the HSPB in consideration of a Certificate of Approval for re-landscaping the park.

Staff executed a contract with Landscape Historian Steven Keylon to prepare a report based on the Board's direction, the draft report dated April, 2018 is attached for Board review and comment.

RECOMMENDATION: Receive the report and provide comments to staff.

Ken Lyon, RA,
Associate Planner

Finn Fagg, AICP
Director of Planning Services

Attachment: Final Draft - Historic Landscape Assessment & Recommendations Report dated April 2018.

CASE #3.1074
HSPB #7
FRANCES STEVENS
SCHOOL & PARK

HISTORIC
LANDSCAPE
ASSESSMENT AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

April, 2018

Steven Keylon,
Landscape Historian



The Frances Stevens School, 1932. Very little designed landscape during the first period of significance.

OVERVIEW

On December 13, 2017, the Department of Planning Services requested a proposal for professional services (RFP) to:

- (1) Review archival files in Planning and at PSHS or any other source to determine any information about the landscape at the school/park that may have existed in the 1920's/30's.
- (2) Make recommendations on how to move forward with landscape revisions to address the dead conditions on the site in a historically appropriate manner.

This report is provided in response to this RFP.

BACKGROUND

Watering restrictions imposed by the State of California in 2015 in response to ongoing drought conditions led to substantial losses of turf and other landscape material in Frances Stevens Park. Frances Stevens Park and School were designated as a Class 1 Historic Site by the Palm Springs City Council on November 7, 1984, and in 2003, became one of the first

historic sites in Palm Springs added to the National Register of Historic Places.

In the fall of 2017, the City's Facilities Maintenance Department, in an effort to respond promptly to public complaints regarding the park's deteriorated landscape prior to the start of the tourist season, (in particular the loss of large areas of turf), installed a scattering of various drought tolerant plants and "terra cotta red" decomposed granite in various perimeter areas of the park. (See attached exhibits). Concern about the visual appearance of this installation was brought to the City's Historic Site Preservation Board ("HSPB") and it was acknowledged that the City had inadvertently proceeded with alteration to this historic site without first obtaining a Certificate of Approval from the HSPB as required by the City's Historic Preservation Ordinance (Municipal Code Section 8.05.180.)

The recently installed landscape revisions were reviewed by the City's HSPB at its December 12, 2017 meeting at which time the Board voted 7-0 to direct staff to

1. Inventory the extant plant material, particularly the trees and land forms.
2. Review the original landscape design for the park.
3. Return with a landscape master plan appropriate to the historic period of significance that the City could implement in phases over time.
4. Submit the recently installed landscape changes to the City's Architectural Review Committee ("AAC") for a recommendation to the HSPB in consideration of a Certificate of Approval for re-landscaping the park.

On January 2, 2018, the City's AAC reviewed the landscape revisions installed by the City's Facilities Maintenance Department and made the following recommendations:

1. The proposed list of plant materials is appropriate for the site, with the exception of the hibiscus plant. Consider adding verbena and natal plum to the list of plant materials.
 2. Focus the immediate budget on a specific area of the site, instead of trying to cover all replacement areas with limited plant materials. Address other areas of the site as more funds become available.
 3. Treat the landscape design for each of the frontage areas differently, based on function and context:
 - a. Palm Canyon has more pedestrian traffic volume and is more urban in nature;
 - b. Granvia Valmonte serves as the principal entrance to the campus; and
 - c. Indian Canyon is more auto-oriented in character.
 4. High-traffic areas, such as the perimeter areas along Palm Canyon, should utilize durable materials such as pavers or artificial turf.
 5. The decomposed granite should have a more neutral color/appearance.
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6. Refer the landscape master plan for the site to the AAC for review and comment, as may be appropriate.

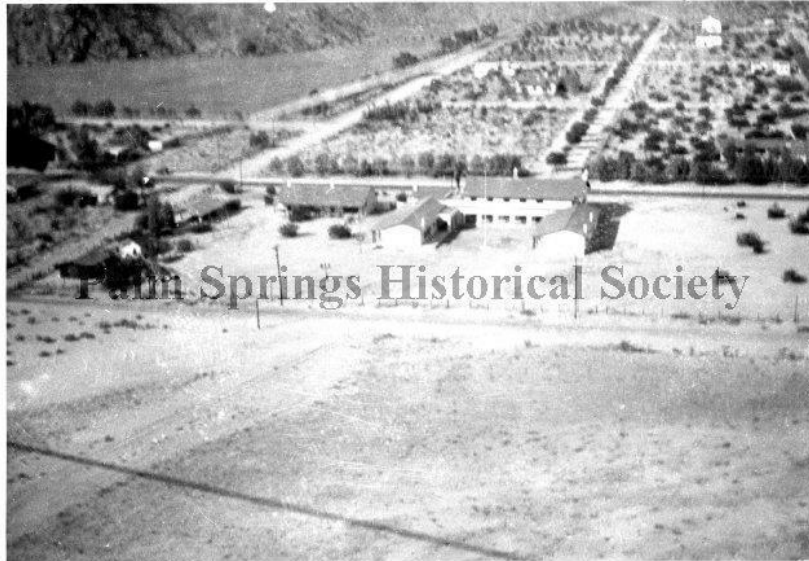
HISTORIC CONTEXT

According to the city of Palm Springs' website, "Frances Stevens Park is centrally located between Downtown and Uptown Palm Springs and situated on the corner Palm Canyon and Indian Canyon Drive, north of Alejo Road. Utilized for its sprawling green space and mature trees, the park hosts several art shows throughout the year including the Desert Arts Festival and is home to the Desert Art Center, a local Non-Profit Organization, offering classes in fine art."

There are two periods of significance relative to the site. The first period of significance spans the years the site was used as a school, 1927-1972. There is little remaining today of the landscape from this period. The second period of significance is relative to the site's use as a public park, and includes the landscape designed in 1973 by master landscape architect David Hamilton. The landscape from this second period has a high degree of historic integrity and is the basis for landscape recommendations found in this report.

The city is the steward of an important work of landscape architecture by the leading landscape architect working in the Coachella Valley in the mid to late 20th Century. Landscape modifications going forward should be carefully planned to be compatible with the park's original design --maintaining the simplicity of the original plant palette and planting style. Hamilton's landscape drawings exist at City Hall and should be consulted when changes need to be made due to new conditions brought on by drought, pests, use patterns, etc.

This document provides a general description of the two established periods of significance. It offers recommendations on how incorporate new landscape materials in those areas where turf and plants have been lost due to drought conditions in a manner consistent with and complementary to the park's 1973 landscape design.



Frances Stevens School, ca. 1929, aerial view looking west. Note the absence of any formally designed landscaping.

FIRST PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: FRANCES STEVENS SCHOOL LANDSCAPE

The Frances Stevens School was built starting in 1927 on land donated by Prescott T. Stevens, Frances Stevens' husband. Prescott Stevens was a cattle rancher from Colorado who became an early land developer in Palm Springs and was part owner of the Whitewater Mutual Water Company. The school was originally named the Palm Springs Desert School and was comprised of a two-room schoolhouse and library that was moved from another site. The school was renamed in honor of Frances Stevens after her death.

The school building has been used as a cultural center as well as a school. The community's first motion picture theater, run by Earl Strebe, was housed in a building on the campus. Through the years buildings were added as needs arose, designed by different people, including architect Albert Frey, who designed an addition to the school in 1944.

From the period during which the site was used as a school, a landscape architect or designer involved in planning the landscape elements of the site has not been identified. From contemporary photographs from the era, it appears to be "a vernacular landscape" -- one of the four types of landscapes as defined by the Secretary of the Interior's Standards: historic designed landscape; historic vernacular landscape; historic site; and ethnographic landscape. A historic vernacular landscape is defined as

"a landscape that evolved through use by the people whose activities or occupancy shaped it. Through social or cultural attitudes of an individual, a family, or a

community, the landscape reflects the physical, biological, and cultural character of everyday lives. Function plays a significant role in vernacular landscapes. This can be a farm complex or a district of historic farmsteads along a river valley. Examples include rural historic districts and agricultural landscapes.”

In early photos, the site appears to be almost entirely sand, with a few trees and shrubs planted near the structures. Later photos show panels of turf adjacent to some of the buildings, and by 1936, there is a large grass meadow used for play.

ANALYSIS OF THE SITE'S HISTORIC INTEGRITY

Comparing historic photos with current conditions, it appears that very little plant material from the first period of significance is extant today. Exceptions include several palm trees, which were relocated on the site when it was modified to serve as a City park, and other mature trees, including an enormous eucalyptus and a desert willow.

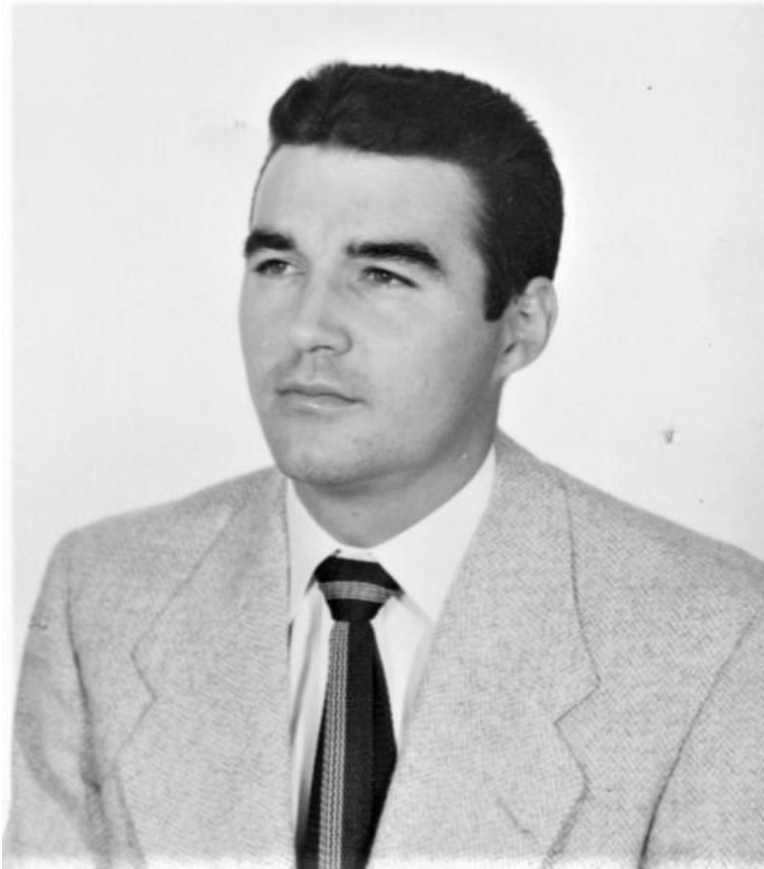
SECOND PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: FRANCES STEVENS PARK LANDSCAPE

In November 1972, a recreation bond (Proposition R) was passed by voters in Palm Springs. The bond would fund the construction of park, recreation and library facilities for the Palm Springs community. One of the projects would be a new park built on the site of the Frances Stevens School. A classroom and cafeteria building would be demolished to create open park space, while the northerly building was retained and remodeled into the community's Senior Citizen Center. The site was dubbed "Everybody's Village", and includes a community arts classroom, art gallery, and an assembly space that is currently leased by the City to the Palm Springs Theater.¹

Landscape architect David Hamilton was hired to design the landscape for the new park. A call for bids went out in August, 1973. The Little Grass Shack Nursery had the lowest bid (\$93,258) and was awarded the project to implement Hamilton's design. A Desert Sun newspaper article stated, "*Extensive landscaping aims to create an open feeling at the northerly tip of the city's downtown and provide a pleasant setting for the Senior Citizen's Center.*"² Frances Stevens Park was dedicated by Vice President Gerald Ford on April 15, 1974.

In 1979, Frances Stevens School and Park was one of ten historic sites designated by the Historic Site Preservation Committee.³ The Committee had been created the prior year and charged with "the duty of setting up a method of protecting the city's past."⁴ The nomination included not only the historic buildings on the site, but the landscaped park itself. In 1984, the site was granted Class One Historic Site Status.

In the years since it was built, the southwest corner of the park was modified to include "Rainmaker," a fountain, sculpture and outdoor amphitheater created by artist David Curt Morris. This sculpture is primarily contained in an open space that had once been a large panel of turf. Otherwise, David Hamilton's designed landscape plan for Frances Stevens Park exhibits a high level of integrity.



David Hamilton, ASLA (1926-2017).

Photo 1953, courtesy Hamilton family.

DAVID HAMILTON, ASLA

Arguably the most important landscape architect in the Coachella Valley, David Hamilton was also the first university-trained landscape architect to both live and work here. Though he is not well-known, he collaborated with the finest architects working in the Coachella Valley on many important projects. He was well-respected and sought after during the years he worked in the Coachella Valley. Frances Stevens Park is a prime example of a relatively intact public park, the design of which is credited to Hamilton.

David Hamilton was born in Detroit in 1926. After serving in the Navy during World War II, Hamilton attended Michigan State University, graduating in December 1950 with a BS in Landscape Architecture. His wife Helen saw an advertisement from the City of Palm Springs for an opening in the Planning Department, and she encouraged Hamilton to apply. He served as a draftsman in the Palm Springs Planning Department from 1951 to 1953. From 1953 to 1957 he worked as a site planner and landscape architect for Quintin Engineers, Ltd. in Los Angeles, returning to the desert in 1957, working for the County of Riverside's Planning Commission's new satellite office in Palm Desert. Hamilton was then recruited back to Palm Springs by Hy Raines, Director of Planning and Pete Peterson, City Manager, where he

returned as assistant planning director, a newly formed position.⁵

In 1960, Hamilton left the planning department to open his own office of landscape architecture. A member of the ASLA since 1951, his professional license had been “grandfathered” when licensure for landscape architects was developed California in 1953 (the first state to require landscape architects to be licensed). He opened an office at 901 N. Palm Canyon but moved into a larger office at 1516 S. Palm Canyon later in the 1960s. One of his first projects was the Royal Hawaiian Estates condominiums, done in collaboration with Donald Wexler and Richard Harrison. Hamilton and Wexler would work together on several projects over the years, including the Palm Springs Airport, the Steel Houses, Desert Water Agency and a Professional Office Park. Donald Wexler said, “I always requested of my clients that David Hamilton be hired from the outset, he was the best.”⁶ Hamilton’s work included residential, commercial and civic properties. Examples of his work include The Ocotillo Palms Estates, Demuth Park, Raymond Cree Junior High School, the Outdoor Memorial at Desert Memorial Park, San Diego Federal Savings and Loan, the Living Desert, College of the Desert, and the Diplomat Condominiums.



Architect Donald Wexler, left, and David Hamilton, with plans for the Palm Springs Airport.

THE LANDSCAPE OF FRANCES STEVENS PARK

David Hamilton's landscape design for Frances Stevens Park sought to create an oasis of green open space in the heart of downtown Palm Springs. To enhance the Spanish-Colonial Revival architecture of the school buildings, Hamilton incorporated several tree and plant species that reinforce the romantic feeling of old California. These species included olive, eucalyptus, and carob. Though some of these plant and tree species have fallen out of favor by today's landscape designers, those that still exist in Frances Stevens Park should be retained as important elements in Hamilton's overall design concept for this park.

Hamilton's circulation plan shows modernist-style pathways in dynamic jagged diagonals, creating triangular or fractured geometric planting beds where pathways converge or in areas immediately adjacent to buildings. These contrast with bucolic open green spaces, the large panels of turf planted on gently mounding, undulating earth forms. Trees were planted in a somewhat formal arrangement: groups of 5, 7, 10 or more trees in rows or angles following pathways or the lines of buildings. Directly adjacent to structures, more informal groupings of palm trees punctuate planting beds that were planted with flowering shrubs and low-growing, often flowering groundcovers.

The following are some of the tree and plant species specified by David Hamilton in his design for Frances Stevens Park. This plant palette (shown on the landscape design drawings) should be referenced when landscape revisions are contemplated for the park. If an original species is determined to be inappropriate because of drought or pest problems, a replacement should be found which is similar in form, color, leaf structure and growing habit. The following lists are not complete, but are a good representation of the plant palette as designed by Hamilton.

T R E E S

- *Pyrus kawakami* (Evergreen Flowering Pear) was planted adjacent to areas where people would walk: (40" on center, 13 gallon) seven in a row along Indian Canyon Drive, in parking areas and in adjacent lawn areas. Five 30" box trees, 24" on center were planted alongside the sidewalk area on the southwest corner of the park. Ten, 15 gallon specimens were planted in a row alongside the northwest building, and trees were centered between the columns of the building.
 - *Rhus lancea* (African Sumac) This drought tolerant tree has a graceful, weeping form. The dark, fissured bark contrasts beautifully with the long, thin, bright, trifoliate leaves. Its yellow-green flowers attract insects and are then followed by bunches of edible fruit that attracts birds. Ten specimens were planted in a long row along the east side of the main building, facing the lawn. This created a dense deep green backdrop to the lawn, partially obscuring the adjacent building, creating a more bucolic open green space.
 - *Olea europea* (European olive) This tree harkens back to the Spanish settlement period of old California. Five full grown specimens were planted on the southwest corner of the park along
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pedestrian pathways in panels of turf. Three more full grown specimens were planted on the northwest corner, creating an asymmetrical balance. Five more specimens in 36” boxes were planted 28” on center on the north east corner of the property.

Other trees specified by Hamilton for Frances Stevens Park include:

- *Prosopis glandulosa* (Honey mesquite)
- *Ceratonia siliqua* (carob)
- *Podocarpus macrophyllus* (Yes podocarpus)
- *Washingtonia filifera* (California desert fan palm)
- *Washingtonia robusta* (Mexican fan palm)

SHRUBS

- *Pittosporum tobira* (Mock Orange)
- *Raphiolepis indica* (Indian Hawthorne)
- *Prunus caroliniana* (Carolina cherry)
- *Ilex vomitoria* (yaupon holly)
- *Myrtle compacta* (dwarf myrtle)
- *Pyracantha fortuneana* 'Graber' (Pyracantha) – espaliered and staked to walls
- *Cocculus laurifolius* - Laurel-Leaf Snailseed
- *thevetia neriifolia* (syn: Cascabela thevetia – yellow oleander)
- *Yucca pendula* (soft leaf yucca)
- *Photinia fraseri*

GROUNDCOVERS

- *Ivy geranium*
- *Petunias*
- *Juniperus x pfitzeriana* (Chinese juniper)
- *Juniperus sabina arcadia* (Arcadia juniper)
- *Carissa grandiflora* – Natal plum “Boxwood Beauty”
- *Hedera helix* – needlepoint English ivy

PLANTING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PERIMETER AREAS OF THE PARK

1. In general, it is recommended that any new planting scheme should utilize plants from Hamilton’s original plant palette.
 2. New planting design should be simple, with plants arranged in groupings, clusters or masses, instead of a disparate mix of species arranged in a dispersed or scattered manner.
 3. The recently installed beds of red decomposed granite are recommended to be removed
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and replaced with stabilized decomposed granite in natural tans and browns such as Palm Springs Gold, Brimstone, or Desert Gold.

4. Though grass does require more water and care, retaining or re-establishing areas of turf can be considered where recreational or functional uses so dictate.

It was stated at the Historic Site Preservation Board meeting of (December 12, 2017) that there was no existing irrigation in the areas where grass was removed, that overspray from adjacent irrigation had been used to try to water grass. However, the irrigation sheet on David Hamilton's 1973 landscape plans shows extensive irrigation throughout all of the park property. The existence and/or functionality of these systems should be verified and re-established where appropriate.

LANDSCAPE RECOMMENDATIONS ALONG PALM CANYON DRIVE

Under the palms along Palm Canyon Drive, Hamilton planted masses of low-growing, drought tolerant *Carissa grandiflora* "Boxwood Beauty." ("Natal Plum"). Creating new areas with groupings of Natal plum as the primary groundcover in newly replanted areas would be an appropriate design consideration. Removal of the recently installed red decomposed granite and replacement of these areas with at least three inches of stabilized Palm Springs Gold, Brimstone, Desert Gold or other neutral warm tan over a weed barrier is recommended in those areas where turf removal is desired for water conservation. (The weed barriers placed beneath the recently installed red decomposed granite are already showing through due to heavy pedestrian traffic.)

The two large lawn panels along Palm Canyon that recently have been replaced with red decomposed granite, are already showing signs of wear. The disparate mix of plant species that were recently planted in a scattered manner over the areas of decomposed granite are recommended for removal. Since this is a heavy traffic area, stabilized decomposed granite, in a neutral warm tan placed in a depth of at least three inches over a full weed barrier is recommended. Where people aren't going to walk, groupings or "beds" of natal plum and/or gold/orange lantana would be an appropriate replacement for the scattered mix of plants recently installed. A general rule of thumb in creating "beds" of plants would be to cluster at least six or more plants of the same species (depending on the size of the area) spaced roughly two to three feet apart.

LANDSCAPE RECOMMENDATIONS ALONG GRANVIA VALMONTE

Hamilton specified ten, 15-gallon *Pyrus kawakami* (Evergreen Flowering Pear) in a row along the sidewalk on Granvia Valmonte. The trees were to be centered between the columns of the

adjacent building. The trees were planted into a long panel of grass. These trees exist today and are in good condition. The trees are planted into a slope, and the recently installed red decomposed granite has already begun to erode. In this instance, re-establishing grass for erosion control or, a neutral stabilized decomposed granite or crushed rock in Brimstone or Desert Gold could be installed with groupings of natal plum or lantana for erosion control.

LANDSCAPE RECOMMENDATIONS ALONG INDIAN CANYON DRIVE

A long row of Evergreen flowering pear still exists along Indian Canyon Drive adjacent to the parking area from Hamilton's original landscape design. One tree has died and is recommended to be replaced.

Hamilton designed a long row of *Prunus caroliniana* (Carolina cherry) as a hedgerow to screen parked cars and vehicular along Indian Canyon Drive. Several of these shrubs are still extant. It is recommended that this hedgerow be re-established to perform the same function.

The adjacent open planter beds were designed with masses of *Yucca pendula* and several species of low-growing juniper groundcover. Flowering color was provided by yellow and orange calendulas. *Yucca* and juniper are both drought-tolerant and offer good color, texture and form. It is recommended that similar plant materials be installed in the same mass groupings in place of the scattered mix of plants and shrubs. Flowering color in gold and orange could be reintroduced with low-growing lantana – again, planted in clusters or groupings of plants of the same species, not as individual plants in a random or scattered fashion. Neutral stabilized decomposed granite such as Palm Springs Gold is again recommended for this area.

CONCLUSION

- The landscape design at Frances Stevens School and Park is significant, having been designed by notable landscape architect David Hamilton.
 - Considerable portions of Hamilton's 1973 landscape design for Frances Stevens School and Park remain intact and should be maintained.
 - Future modifications to the landscape should be based on retaining and/or restoring as much of Hamilton's original design and plant palette as possible.
 - Where practical to do so, trees and shrubs from the original design that have died or been removed should be replaced with the same or similar species.
 - Where use patterns or heavy pedestrian traffic demand changes in landscape and/or hardscape, such changes should be considered within the context of Hamilton's original design for the park such that the changes are visually integrated and harmonious with the plant palette of the original park design.
 - The recently installed red decomposed granite and scattered plantings diminish the visual continuity of the landscape in Frances Stevens Park and are detrimental to the park's historic integrity. As funding allows the red DG and scattered plantings should be
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removed and replaced as recommended in this report.

S U P P L E M E N T A L M A T E R I A L

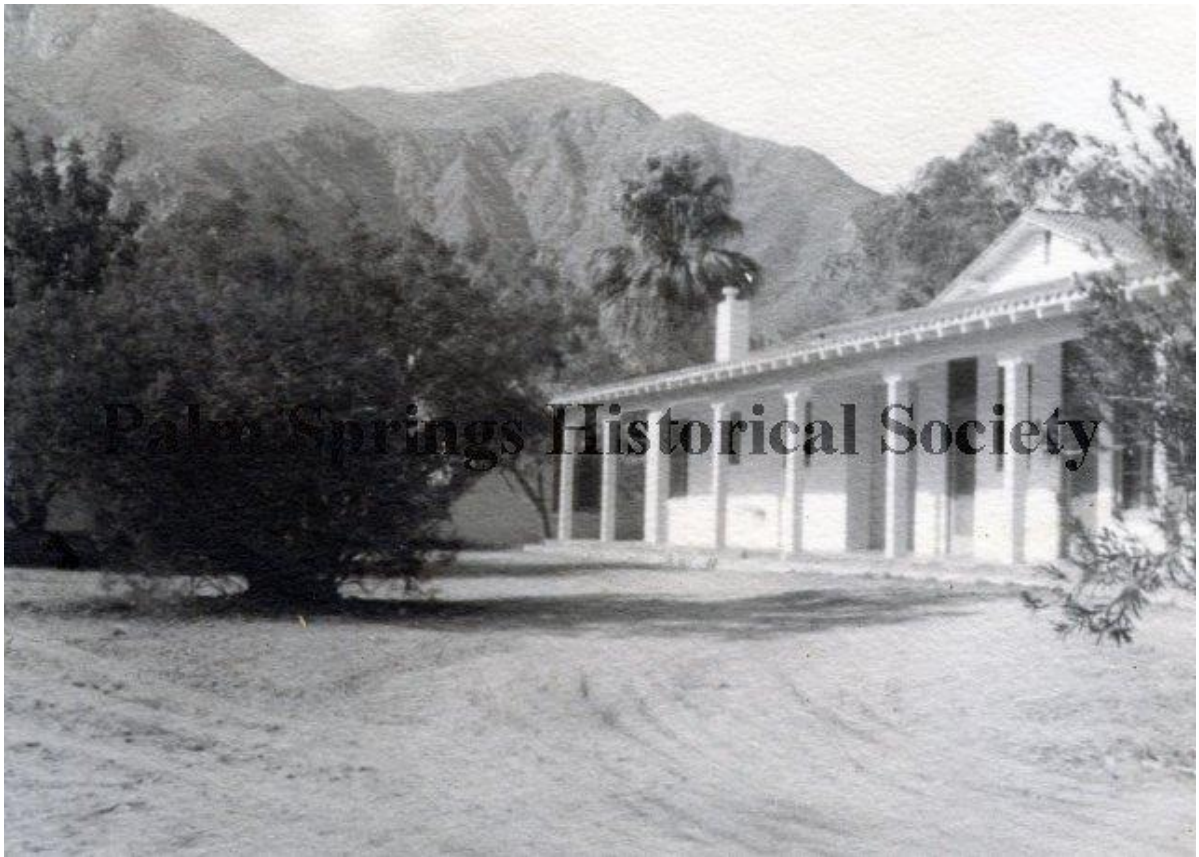
The following photographs of the Frances Stevens School are courtesy Palm Springs Historical Society



Frances Stevens School, two rooms, ca. 1927



Ca. 1932



Frances Stevens School, facing south.



Unidentified girl, ca. 1938. Several large shrubs planted in native sand.



Class photo, 1936, showing grass panel near school building



Relay race, 1936. Large open panel of turf



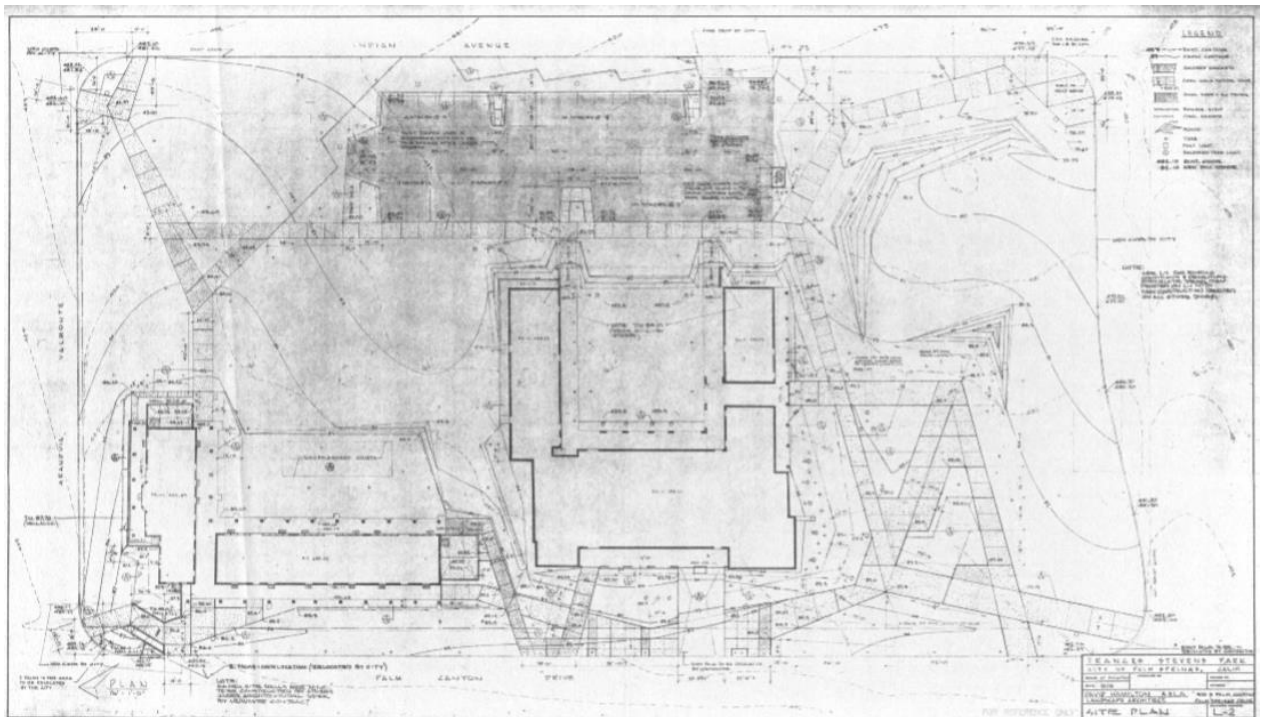
Katherine Finchy at Frances Stevens School, ca 1934



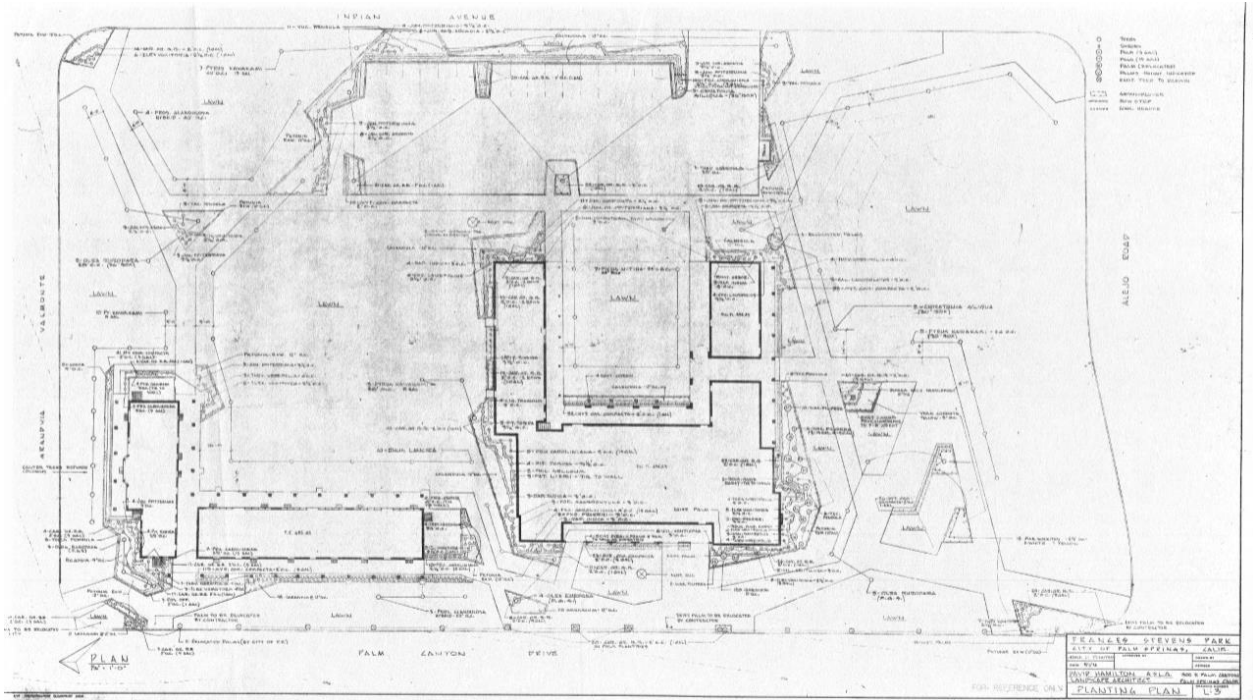
Katherine Finchy at the playground, ca 1934



Undated photo, probably ca. 1950, showing panel of grass near school building



David Hamilton Site Plan for Frances Stevens Park, dated August 1, 1973. Palm Springs City Hall archives



David Hamilton Planting Plan for Frances Stevens Park, dated August 1, 1973. Palm Springs City Hall archives.

¹ “Work Begun on Center,” *Desert Sun*, November 10, 1973, p. 7.

² “Work Begun on Center,” *Desert Sun*, November 10, 1973, p. 7.

³ “10 Historic Sites Designated,” *Desert Sun*, February 26, 1979, p. 1.

⁴ “Group Seeks to Preserve the Past,” *Desert Sun*, September 12, 1979, p. 2.

⁵ All early references to David Hamilton’s life, education and career from interview with David Hamilton, February 13, 2016.

⁶ Interview with Donald Wexler, February 25, 2011.