

Fernside

The Estate of Alfred Andrew Cohen and Emilie Gibbons Cohen

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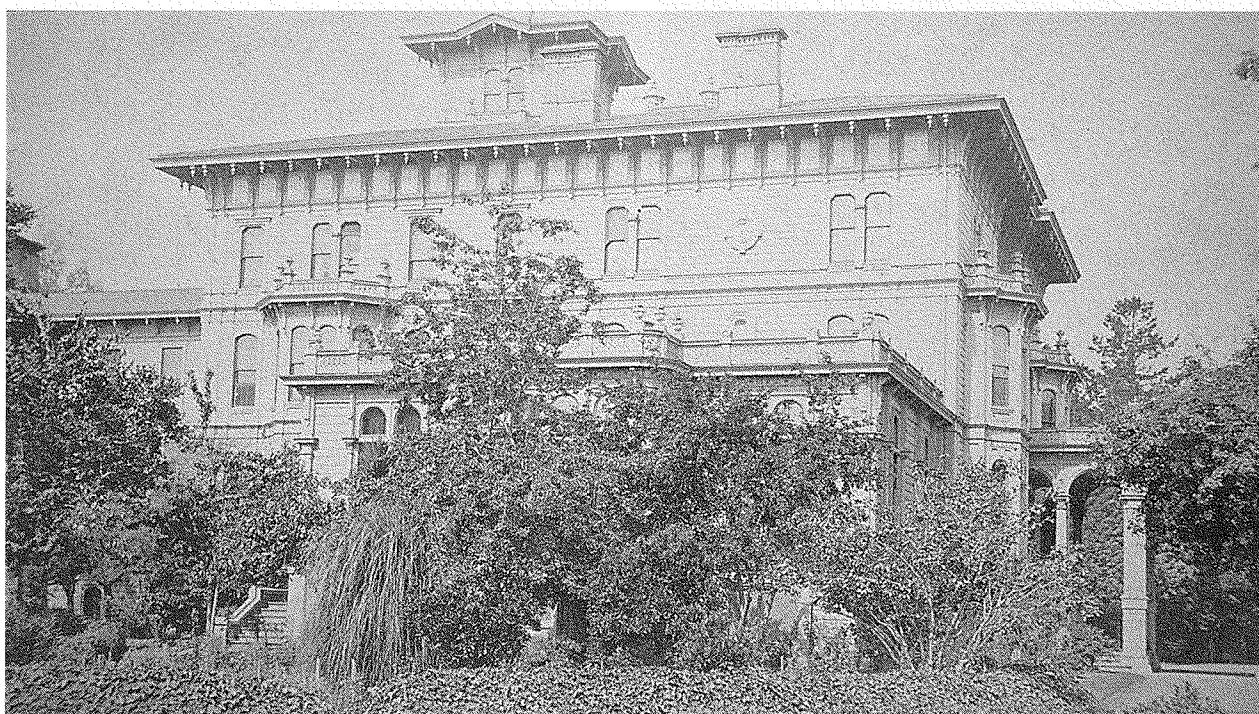


FIG. 1. *Fernside* by Wright & Sanders architects, 1872-74. The side of house showing one-story music room added by 1880. The entry porte-cochère can be seen on the right. Next to the addition is a second stair leading to the cross hall. To the left of the central block is the two-story service section of the house. Photograph by Edgar Cohen.

The vast wealth generated in the early years of the state of California was reflected in the construction in the 1860s and 1870s of several grand estates and townhouses, including many in the San Francisco Bay Area.

There is a common perception that early California was behind the fashions of the Eastern U.S., where trends were set and new styles developed, but this was not always the case. For example, the interiors of California estates such as Darius Ogden Mills's Millbrae (1869-71) and Milton Slocum Latham's Thurlow Lodge (1872-73), both sophisticated country residences, and Mark Hopkins's grand San Francisco residence were designed and furnished by Herter Brothers, the eminent New York interiors firm.¹

The interiors of these great estates represent Herter Brothers' "high end" work in California. But a different view of their California work is presented in *Fernside*, the home of Alfred Andrew Cohen and Emilie Gibbons Cohen, whose taste and budget were more conservative, and whose furnishings were not at first the richly

embellished "high end" types. And unlike Hopkins, Mills and Latham, who purchased the most fashionable furnishings for their new estates, the Cohens purchased increasingly stylish interior decor and furnishings over a period of many years.

The Cohens' residence also presents a mystery, for it is not clear just what was Herter Brothers' involvement in the interior decor purchases. Did the firm only supply furniture and interior fittings from their showroom, or did they have a major involvement in designing the interiors at *Fernside*? In the next pages I will describe, often for the first time, details of the interior design of *Fernside* and, I hope, shed some light on this and other questions as well.

The primary sources for this study were uncatalogued papers, letters, drawings, and photographs which belong to members of the Cohen family, and published references and newspaper articles. The family photographs are by noted 19th century photographer Eadweard Muybridge, and the Cohen's third son, Edgar, a photographer of note. Further extensive conversations with the great-grand-

children of the A. A. Cohens, particularly with Carter Keane, a great-grandson, have added to the information giving insight and understanding to the uncatalogued material. Curators across the country have been helpful and informative both with their institutions' collections and their thoughts on the surviving Cohen pieces. I am grateful to all for their knowledge and assistance.²

THE COHENS

Alfred Andrew Cohen was born in England, July 17, 1829, to Andrew and Hannah Cohen. After reversals of family fortunes he left Exeter Academy and went to work in the office of a London solicitor. He emigrated to Canada in 1843, then to Jamaica, and finally in 1849 to Sacramento, California, arriving via Panama.³ He finally settled in San Francisco where he is listed in the 1852-1853 City Directory as a merchant.⁴ On July 17, 1854, Cohen married Emilie Gibbons, daughter of former Wilmington, Delaware, residents Martha Poole and Dr. Henry Gibbons, a noted physician and a founder of the California Academy of Sciences.⁵ The Cohens had four sons and three daughters.

Cohen's business activities were varied. He read law and in 1857 was admitted by the California Supreme Court to practice. By 1863 he was engaged in the East Bay in railroad and ferry enterprises, which he and partners eventually sold to the Central Pacific Railroad in 1870. For the balance of his professional life he engaged in invest-

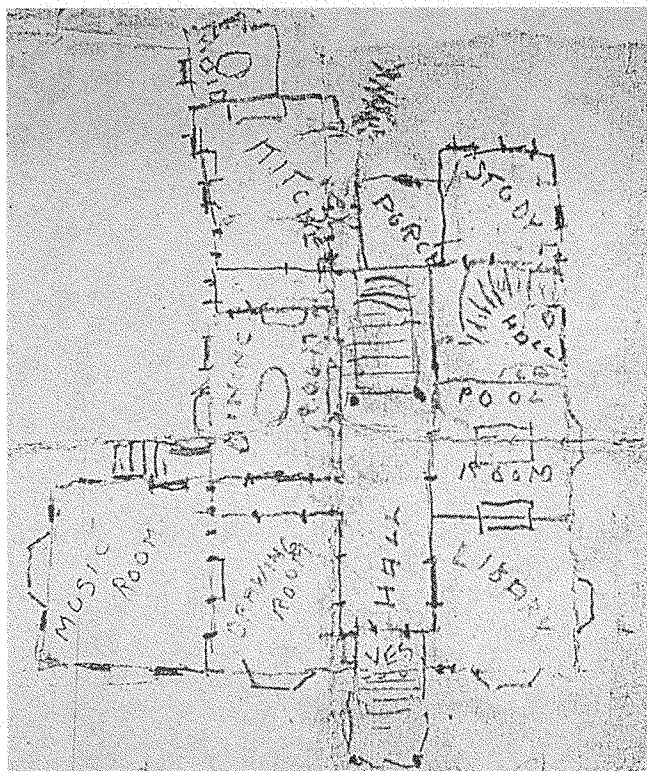


FIG. 2. First Floor plan sketched by Mabel Cohen showing the central halls with major first floor rooms. The rear service section of the house is not included. Family collection.

ments, farming and a commercial law practice. Cohen had several dealings with Central Pacific Railroad representing both defendants and plaintiffs. It has been said he was so successful in winning cases against the railroad that the owners made peace with him and hired him as their counsel.

Cohen died in 1887 in Nebraska en route from Washington, D.C., where he had been representing Central Pacific before the federal railroad commission. Newspaper accounts have estimated the value of his estate to be \$5 million. Emilie Cohen continued to live at Fernside until her death in 1925.⁶

THE ESTATE AND HOUSE

Fernside is located in Alameda, an island community in San Francisco Bay southwest of Oakland. It was acquired in the mid-1850s and, like other country estates in the Bay Area, was also a working farm. Exactly when the Cohens took up residence cannot be pinpointed, but an article by L. Robinson places the date for building a home in Alameda as "the spring of 1856," when the Cohens one morning sailed to Alameda for a picnic and were immediately charmed by the location.⁷ Variations in published accounts concur, but according to a descendant, the story may have been "made up by Uncle Edgar to pull the leg of a reporter." Residence had likely been taken up by 1857.⁸ A map dated September 9, 1859, shows the estate had been increased to 110 acres and five buildings including the residence, a substantial Gothic Revival structure.

Over the years, buildings were added to the estate, including an elaborate stable, built in 1870 for prize thoroughbred horses, and a bowling alley which, after her husband's death, Emilie Cohen remodeled as a residence.⁹ At some point, the Gothic Revival house was moved from its original location and then neglected, as an Edgar Cohen photo shows. About 1872 building began for a new grand house, an Italianate structure.¹⁰ It is this new house, its interiors and furnishings, that are discussed here.

Although grand, the life of this mansion was brief. On March 24, 1897, a fire began in the building's tower, and spread quickly. When it was found there was insufficient water to save the home, firemen and volunteers concentrated on removing furnishings, decorative objects, and bric-a-brac from the burning building. Because of their valiant work, many objects exist today.¹¹ Newspaper accounts of the fire valued the house and its contents between \$250,000 and \$300,000. Insurance covered the building for \$90,000, frescoes for \$10,000, furniture at \$40,000, pictures at \$10,000 and mirrors at \$5,000.¹² Emilie Cohen's handwritten lists of contents of the house and copies of bills, which she probably requested from the suppliers and then submitted for settlement of their insurance claim, provided much information for this paper. It is curious that some lists and bills have survived and others have not.

The new 1870s Italianate house (Fig. 1) was designed by Wright and Saunders, a prominent architectural firm noted for their churches and institutional buildings.¹³

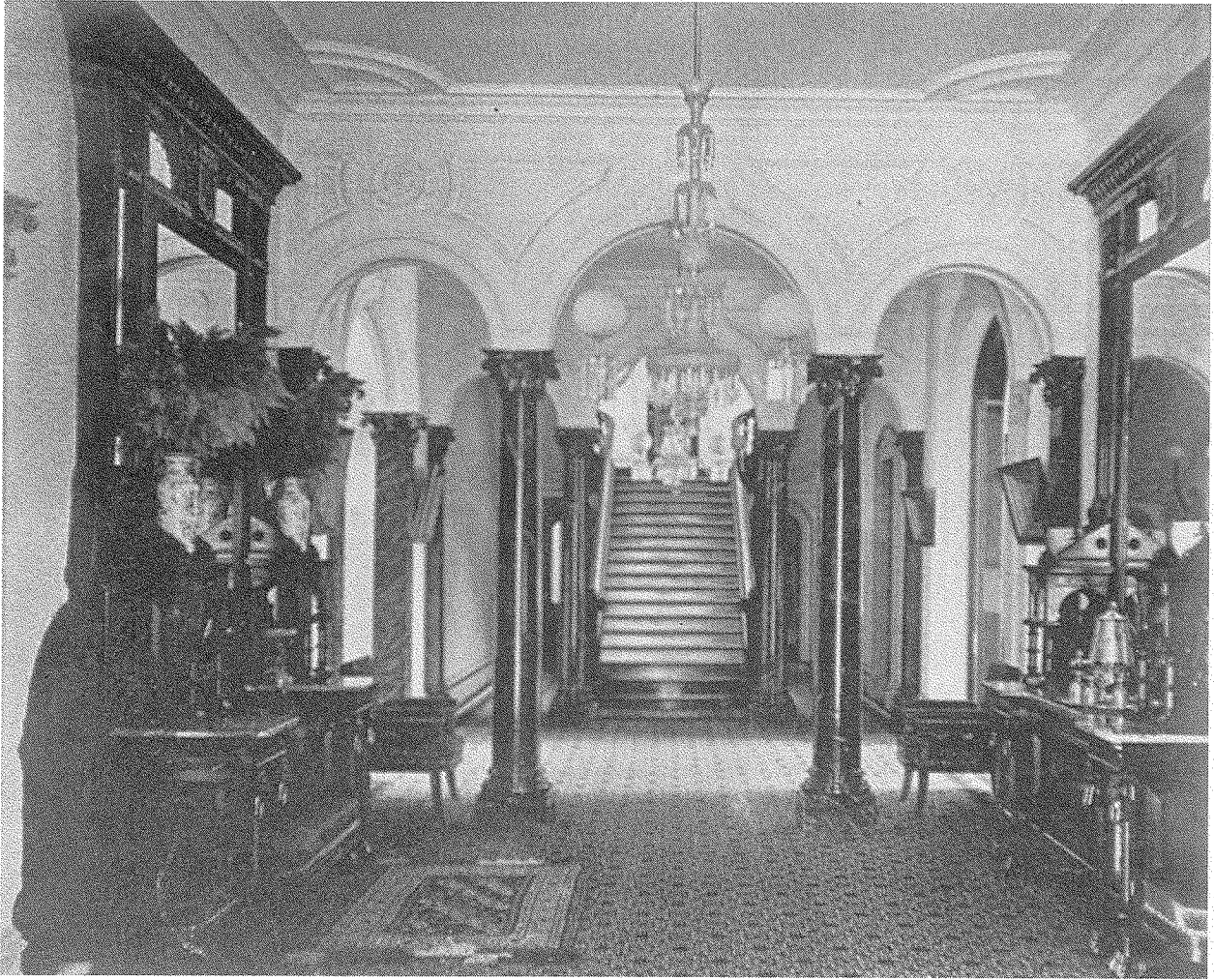


FIG. 3. First Floor Hall showing the Herter Brothers mirrors; one has a case piece at the bottom, the second a seat at the bottom. Beyond the double columns and triple arches is the cross hall. To the rear is the grand stair to the second-floor art gallery. Photograph by Edgar Cohen.

A large home of some 52 rooms, it was furnished by Herter Brothers and Pottier and Stymus of New York and occupied by 1874. W. and J. Sloane, a leading carpet supplier, and other New York and California firms also fitted the interior from the time the house was first occupied through 1888, shortly after Cohen died.¹⁴

The new three-story Fernside was a wood building consisting of a roughly square main section with a lower service wing to the rear. A simple sketch completed by daughter Mabel Cohen (Fig. 2) shows a grand central hall with a prominent staircase leading to the upper floors. To the right of the entry way were located the library, billiards room, service hall with private stair, and study. To the left were the drawing room, dining room, kitchen and service space beyond. By 1880 the large veranda next to the drawing room was replaced by a music room. Jib windows joined this room with the drawing room. Other rooms — probably located on the first floor — were listed in an inventory of “painted and frescoed walls and ceilings”: a breakfast room, a butler’s pantry, an odd

“mirror room” whose use is not known.¹⁵ Because they are based only upon this list and on sketchy bills and family oral history, the configuration and types of second- and third-floor rooms are not well understood.

There are four extant drawings of the Fernside ceilings; three are in color. One illustration of the 25' x 40' drawing room ceiling shows cherubs, representing painting, sculpture, literature and poetry—allegorical subjects more commonly found in a library—and a “W.&S.” (Wright and Saunders) monogrammed in the lower right hand corner. The *Oakland Enquirer* reported at the time of the fire that the frescoes had been created by Tojetti, an artist known for portraying cherubs in his ceiling paintings.¹⁶ A second drawing, also with cherubs, depicts a room about 40' x 40' which was probably the music room. The third color drawing depicts an unknown bay window ceiling, and the last drawing in black and white for a room measuring 27½' x 45' illustrates stylized floral ceiling decoration and is signed Fred A. Longé Jr. To date, these are the only drawings of Fernside which have come to light.

