

December 6, 2020

Marcello Fonio Jr.
1580 Lincoln LLC
1600 Lincoln Ave.
San Rafael CA 94901

Subject: Proposal for Review of a Proposed Hotel Project for conformity Historic Preservation Standards. The Project is located at 1580 Lincoln Avenue, San Rafael, Marin County, California.

Dear Marcello,

Introduction

A hotel is proposed at 1580 Lincoln Avenue, San Rafael, Marin County, California, which is currently the site of a plant nursery. The subject property is located in the vicinity of three properties that have been recognized by the City of San Rafael as historical resources: 1811 and 1817 Grand Avenue and 1601 Lincoln Avenue. This letter report will assess potential impacts on the historical resources by the proposed project. (It is understood that there are no historical resources located on proposed project site.)

Neighborhood Historic Context

Coast Miwok people inhabited the area prior to the establishment of Mission San Rafael Arcángel in 1817 by Spanish missionaries who sought to convert local Native Americans to Christianity. The town of San Rafael grew gradually after California statehood in 1850, becoming the Marin County seat in 1851. Following completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, construction of Marin County Courthouse in 1872, and incorporation in 1874, San Rafael entered a period of accelerated growth. William Tell Coleman, who moved to San Rafael in 1871, was influential in the construction of the Marin County Courthouse, the development of the water system, promotion of the railroad, and construction of the Hotel Rafael (a grand resort in a garden setting just north of Downtown). By the early 1870s, Coleman had acquired large tracts of land around the developing town. San Rafael was built out in the 1880s and 1890s as regional transportation infrastructure (railroads and ferries) was improved. By the 1890s San Rafael was a commercial and cultural center with growing residential neighborhoods.¹

The rural neighborhood around the subject property was north of Downtown San Rafael along the main route that led north, which was known in that era as Petaluma Road or Petaluma Avenue. By the 1870s, the roughly north-south highway and the railroad ran through the rural area on parallel routes. Historic maps indicate that they appear to have been in or near their current locations about 300 feet apart. During this period, William Coleman owned hundreds of acres north of San Rafael including in the neighborhood of the subject property. Although the character of the neighborhood would remain rural well into the twentieth century, the presence of Petaluma Road and the railroad

¹ Images of America: Early San Rafael, 28, 37.

tracks stimulated limited residential development. By the late 1890s the Coleman property had been subdivided into parcels of several acres, and there were farm houses and other buildings along the highway. There were smaller town lots along the east side of the railroad tracks, which was more accessible from Downtown San Rafael. Grand Avenue crossed the highway in its present alignment, but was a through street that curved south and crossed the tracks before passing the Grand Avenue depot and the Hotel Rafael and on its way to Downtown San Rafael.²



Figure 1: Undated Map of Coleman's Addition, *Anne T. Kent Collection, Marin County Free Library.*

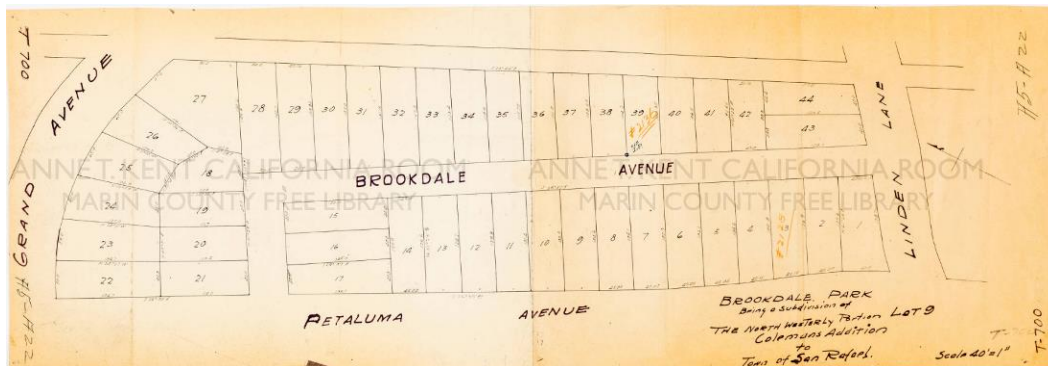


Figure 2: Undated Map of Brookdale Park tract of Coleman's Addition, *Anne T. Kent Collection, Marin County Free Library.*

² Official county map of Marin County. Produced by H. Austin, 1873; Map of the City of San Rafael Compiled from Official Surveys, Geo. L Richardson, C.E., 1899.

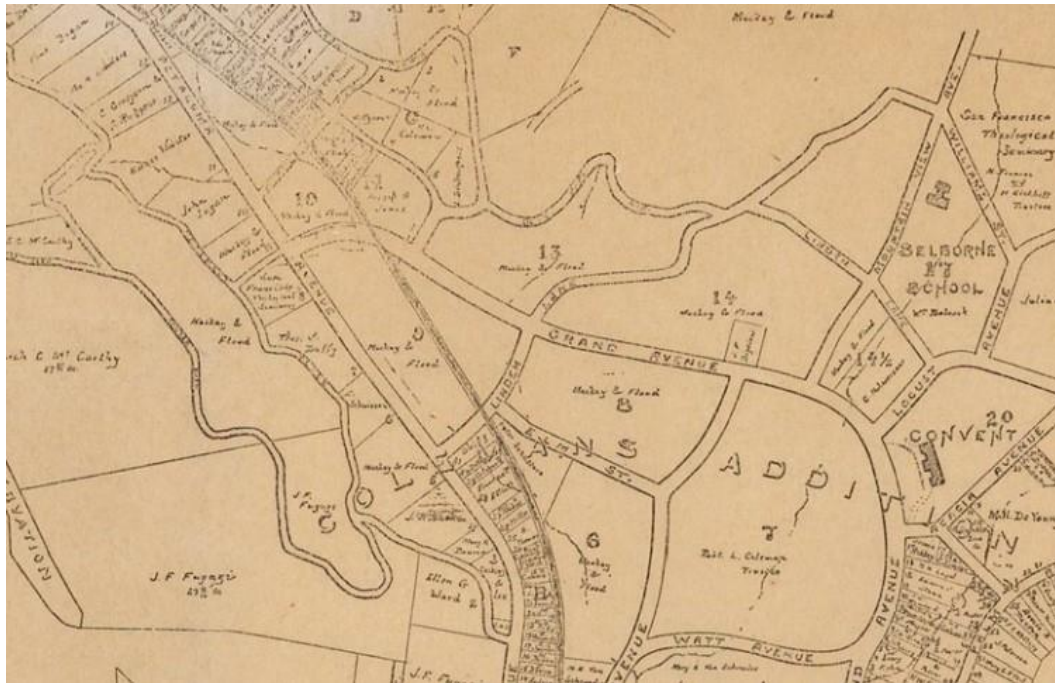


Figure 3: Map of the City of San Rafael Compiled from Official Surveys by Geo. L. Richardson, 1899, *Anne T. Kent Collection, Marin County Free Library*.

After the great earthquake of 1906, San Rafael's population was expanded by refugees from San Francisco. New residential construction to house these new residents sprang up in semi-rural neighborhoods as well as Downtown. In 1909, Lincoln Avenue (Petaluma Road) became part of a newly-designated California state highway. The old route became increasingly important as automobile traffic began replacing rail during the 20th century. Development in the neighborhood remained gradual, with single-family residences and farms as well as highway-adjacent businesses. The federal government authorized the construction of US 101 in 1925, and by 1929 a more direct route through Marin County was under development. By the mid-1930s, US 101 (which continued to follow the old Lincoln Avenue north of San Rafael) was handling 1.5 million cars annually. Population growth and ever-increasing reliance on automobile transportation created demand for additional infrastructure. The opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937 further increased automobile traffic between Marin County and San Francisco, effectively ending the rail transit era. The last commuter train departed from San Rafael in 1941, the same year a viaduct for Highway 101 was completed through Downtown San Rafael.³

³ Jim Wood, History of a Highway, *Marin Magazine*, April 17, 2009, <https://marinmagazine.com/community/history/history-of-a-highway/>, accessed July 20, 2020.



Figure 4: USDA Aerial Photograph, 1931.



Figure 5: Postcard, Villa Rafael Motel c1961.

The freeway was routed adjacent to the railroad tracks; roughly 300 feet east of Lincoln Avenue. Lincoln Avenue still carried a substantial number of cars and remained attractive for development. In 1949, Villa Rafael Motel (later Villa Inn) opened at the northeast corner of Grand and Lincoln. By this time, the nursery was operating at the southwest corner of the intersection. Over the next three decades, many of the single-family houses and large open parcels in the neighborhood were replaced with businesses or large multi-story apartment buildings. By the 1960s, Lincoln Avenue had been widened and the row of trees that lined both sides of the road in the 1930s had been removed. Grand Avenue was truncated just west of the railroad tracks and became a dead end that did not connect directly to San Rafael, and a tall sound wall was constructed between the railroad tracks and freeway. Villa Rafael Motel was expanded several times over the decades, and the nursery also added buildings to its site. In 2020, the neighborhood exhibits an eclectic mix of small early-twentieth

century residences, multi-family buildings constructed after 1950, and commercial uses. The nearby railroad tracks and freeway walls are notable elements of the setting.



Figure 6: USDA Aerial Photograph, 1965.

Historical Resources

Three properties in the neighborhood have been recognized by the City of San Rafael as historical resources: 1811 and 1817 Grand Avenue and 1601 Lincoln Avenue. All three houses were constructed c1908, and were thus part of the building boom stimulated in Marin County by the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. 1601 Lincoln Avenue is a straightforward example of Craftsman architecture, a style that was emerging at the beginning of the century. It exhibits the horizontal massing, decorative dormer, exposed rafter tails, shingle cladding, and cottage windows that are hallmarks of the style. Its builder and architect are unknown. It was found significant for its architecture and added to the local historic register in 1977. It has been subsequently altered with the addition of incompatible tile to its original concrete steps and wood fencing atop its front yard perimeter wall. There have been no other apparent alterations, and the property appears to retain sufficient integrity for historic eligibility.

1811 and 1817 (originally 911 and 917) Grand Avenue were built about the same time. A pair of nearly identical houses (except for the fact that 1811 has been raised) they also exhibit the form, massing, and materials typically associated with Craftsman architecture. The presence of corner bays with steeply-pitched, pointed roofs complicates their architecture by introducing an element associated with older Victorian architectural styles. This blending of styles is typical of vernacular houses constructed in the first decade of the twentieth century and strongly suggests design by a builder rather than an architect. Edward Helms, a local contractor who built many houses in San Rafael in the years immediately following the San Francisco earthquake, constructed and probably designed the two houses. A native of Denmark who was in his early 30s during this era, Helms is not known to have designed or built other architecturally significant residences. He was active as a local builder until about 1910, after which he appears to have relocated. 1811 Grand Avenue was raised and transformed into a two-story house prior to 1977. The two houses were found significant for their architecture and added to the local historic register as a district in 1979. There has

subsequently been a change in use from residential to commercial, and portions of the front yards have been converted to parking. There have been no other apparent alterations, and both properties appear to retain sufficient integrity for historic eligibility.

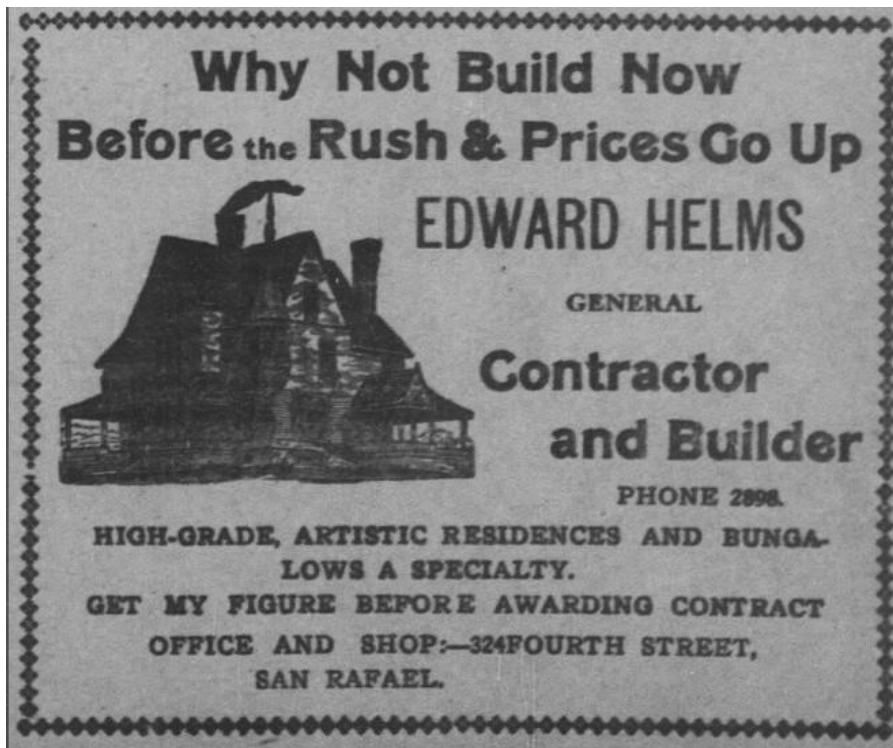


Figure 7: Advertisement for Edward Helms, *Marin Journal*, April 29, 1909.



Figure 8: Neighborhood overview with nursery at 1580 Lincoln Avenue, camera facing southeast, December 9, 2020.



Figure 9: Neighborhood overview with Villa Inn at 1600 Lincoln Avenue, camera facing east, December 9, 2020.



Figure 10: Villa Inn, camera facing north, December 9, 2020.



Figure 11: 1817 Grand Avenue left frame with 1580 Lincoln Avenue right frame, camera facing south, December 9, 2020.



Figure 12: 1817 Grand Avenue, camera facing southwest, December 9, 2020.



Figure 13: 1817 Grand Avenue with railroad tracks and freeway sound wall left frame, camera facing southeast, December 9, 2020.



Figure 14: 1601 Lincoln Avenue, camera facing northwest, December 9, 2020.



Figure 15: 1601 Lincoln Avenue, camera facing west, December 9, 2020.

Project Description

The proposed project is a four-story hotel with 46 guest rooms. There will be 38 parking stalls, and the hotel will include a boardroom, fitness center, outdoor pet area, and second floor guest patio. A ground-floor cafe will be open to the public. The vehicular entrance is on Grand Avenue. The hotel's north elevation will be set back roughly 30 feet from Grand Avenue; its west elevation will be set back between 3 and 10 feet from Lincoln Avenue. There are two landscaped areas between the building and Grand Avenue, and a landscaped area enclosed by a low wall at the south end of the building along Lincoln Avenue. The west elevation and northeast corner also feature one story volumes from which the main building is stepped back. The building is clad in stucco, with brick cladding at the ground floor and pitched roof forms topped with metal tile.

Review of Historic Preservation Standards

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties is oriented primarily toward the preservation, rehabilitation, and restoration of historic properties. Its recommendations for compatible new construction are fairly general. The guidelines for infill construction in historic neighborhoods state that "new construction should be appropriately scaled and located far enough away from the historic building to maintain its character and that of the site and setting." The scale of the proposed hotel building is larger than the modest-sized historic residences. 1601 Lincoln Avenue, however, is located across the street roughly 100 feet from the proposed building. Although it is lower in height than the roughly 50-foot tallest volume of the hotel, it is sited somewhat uphill from the subject property, which minimizes the difference in height. Furthermore, the three-story apartment building at 1579 Lincoln Avenue is very similar in scale and massing to the proposed hotel, and is only about 40 feet from the 1601 Lincoln Avenue. Therefore, introduction of the hotel to the neighborhood is a sufficient distance that it will have a minimal impact on the historic setting of the house at 1601 Lincoln Avenue.

The parcels that hold 1817 and 1811 Grand Avenue are located adjacent to the subject property, and the two houses are about 40 and 90 feet (respectively) from the proposed building. Because of this proximity to 1811 Grand Avenue, several design elements will provide a buffer between the historic building and the new hotel. There will be a landscaped area including existing mature palms and other large vegetation that will visually screen the hotel from the historic building. The building itself will be stepped back at the northeast corner of the property: a single-story volume will be only about 15 feet tall (lower in height than the adjacent 1.5-story 1817 Grand Avenue). The volume behind it will rise to about 45 feet rather than the 50-foot height of its tallest volume.

Furthermore, the neighborhood does not exhibit a strongly residential character, nor is it a pristine historic setting. When the houses were originally constructed, they were in a semi-rural neighborhood sandwiched between a busy highway and the railroad tracks. Since that time, the transportation-commercial aspects of the neighborhood have been markedly expanded and its rural features have been lost. A freeway has been constructed through the neighborhood, the original highway has been widened and become much busier, and commercial uses including a nursery and inn (with a large two-story building directly across the street) have been developed near these houses. Grand Avenue was cut off at the railroad tracks and a tall sound wall was constructed at its end. In recent years, a large apartment building was constructed nearby and portions of the front yards of both historic houses have been converted to parking. The fact that the adjacent historic residences have not been used as such since the 1990s (when they were converted to office space) reflects the alterations to the neighborhood that have taken place over time. They have rendered the neighborhood less residential in character and have completely erased its original semi-rural feel. Because of the measures taken to buffer the new building from the historic buildings and because introduction of a hotel represents a modest change to the already heavily altered and eclectic setting of this neighborhood, the proposed project will not have a negative impact on 1811 and 1817 Grand Avenue.

For the reasons stated above, this proposed project will not have a significant negative impact on a historical resource.

Please contact me by phone at 707/290-2918 or email at kara.brunzell@yahoo.com with any questions or comments.

Sincerely,



Kara Brunzell, M.A.
Architectural Historian