

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY	
RECEIVED	
DATE ENTERED	

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

William Ralston Home

AND/OR COMMON

Berchman's Hall

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

College of Notre Dame

\_\_NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Belmont

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

\_\_ VICINITY OF

Mu1

STATE

California

CODE

06

COUNTY

San Mateo County

CODE

081

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

**CATEGORY**

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

**OWNERSHIP**

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED

**STATUS**

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

**PRESENT USE**

- AGRICULTURE
- COMMERICAL
- EDUCATIONAL
- ENTERTAINMENT
- GOVERNMENT
- INDUSTRIAL
- MILITARY
- MUSEUM
- PARK
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- RELIGIOUS
- SCIENTIFIC
- TRANSPORTATION
- OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

Sisters of the College of Notre Dame: Sister Catherine Julie, President

STREET & NUMBER

College of Notre Dame

CITY, TOWN

Belmont

\_\_ VICINITY OF

STATE

California

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

San Mateo County Court House

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

San Mateo

STATE

California

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

DATE

\_\_FEDERAL \_\_STATE \_\_COUNTY \_\_LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

## HISTORY

Ralston Hall was the country estate of William Chapman Ralston, San Francisco financier, founder of the Bank of California, and builder of the California Theater and the Palace Hotel in San Francisco.

Located in the ruggedly beautiful Canada del Diablo twenty miles south of San Francisco, Belmont, as the estate was called, was purchased by Mr. Ralston in 1864. He utilized a modest villa built by Count Leonetto Cipriani in the 1850's as the core of his great house which ultimately boasted over eighty rooms. It was a Victorian palace with extensive outbuildings, one of which--a magnificent stone carriage house--is also standing and in use today.

The house and grounds, although largely completed by 1868, were constantly embellished until Ralston's death in 1875, when the estate passed to his former partner, Senator William Sharon. Senator Sharon lived in the house until his death in 1884. Subsequently the house was sold to Mrs. Alpheus Bull who established a girls' finishing school, Radcliffe Hall, in the mansion. Following her death it was sold in 1900 to Dr. A. M. Gardner, superintendent of the State Hospital in Napa, for use as a private "nerve" sanitarium. After Dr. Gardner's death in 1913 the sanitarium waned in reputation and finally closed after World War I.

In 1922 the house and property were purchased by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur who were searching for a suitable place to relocate their college which was then in San Jose. In the many years since they acquired the sadly-deteriorated mansion the Sisters have restored it to much of its original magnificence and furnished it with antiques of Ralston's period. Because of the many changes of ownership, very few of Mr. Ralston's furnishings remained in the house but a few have been given back to the college by subsequent owners who felt that the pieces belonged in Ralston Hall again.

In style Ralston Hall is a modified Italian villa. The interior incorporates many features of nineteenth century "steamboat Gothic" construction and design, reminiscent of Ralston's early days on the river boats of the Ohio and Mississippi before he came to California.

## FOYER

The foyer is characterized by classic columns, crystal chandeliers, magnificent mirrors and a grand staircase leading up to a gallery of opera boxes overlooking the skylighted entrance to the ballroom. In design it anticipated the court entrance of the Palace Hotel which Ralston was to build later. The fifteen-foot high doors are hung on double hinges to swing in two directions and all hardware--door knobs, railings, hinges and door plates--was silver-plated in Ralston's day. Much of this original hardware remains today, echoing the days of the silver barons who backed development of the Comstock lode.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1864 - 1875

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

WILLIAM CHAPMAN RALSTON  
(1826 - 1875)

William Chapman Ralston was born January 12, 1826, in Plymouth, Ohio. He came to San Francisco as a young man. Often called "the man who built San Francisco," Ralston was an imaginative, aggressive businessman and financier. He loved his adopted State and worked to attract industries and Eastern capital to the West. He built the Palace Hotel and founded the Bank of California.

He amassed much of his fortune through financing of the Comstock Lode silver mines. Like many of his contemporaries he wanted a large country estate. In 1864 he purchased a modest villa and surrounding properties which belonged to Count Leonetto Cipriani and spent the next four years enlarging the villa by some 80 additional rooms. He built his own water and gas works and supplied these utilities to the few straggling homes of the infant village of Belmont.

Ralston entertained all the great and near great who came to San Francisco in his palatial home. He used the beauty of the natural setting and the opulence of his home and entertainment to impress visitors with the potential of California. He had a private telegraph line from San Francisco to his home and would telegraph his wife he was bringing fifty or more guests for dinner that evening. However, there were also formal occasions with engraved invitations and much preparation, such as the dinner for 110 guests when the Ralstons entertained the Japanese Ambassador Extraordinary, Sinu Iwakura, and members of the Japanese Embassy who were on a formal mission to the United States.

Among prominent visitors to the home during Ralston's days were Admiral David Farragut, Vice-President Schuyler Calfax, Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, Anson Burlingame, James Flood, and General Ulysses S. Grant, later President.

Unfortunately, although Ralston was a brilliant promoter and a man of large capabilities in many areas, he overextended himself. His involvements in a legion of financial projects led to dangerous use of funds from the Bank of California of which he was both President and Cashier. In 1875 the Bank closed its doors temporarily. The panic toppled all of his dreams. He signed over his estate and properties to his partner, Senator William Sharon, to cover any losses.

In the afternoon of the day he resigned as President of the Bank of California Ralston went swimming in the Bay off Aquatic Park, as was his custom. It was a very hot August day and he had been under tremendous strain. Whether he suffered a heart

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Ira B. Cross, Financing An Empire  
 Cecil J. Tilton, William Ralston, Courageous Builder  
 Julian Dana, The Man Who Built San Francisco: William Ralston  
 George D. Lyman, Ralston's Ring

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 4 acres

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,0	5,6,3	2,0,0	4,1	5,2	3,0,0	B	1,0	5,6,3	1,2,0	4,1	5,2	2,5,0
	ZONE	EASTING		NORTHING				ZONE	EASTING		NORTHING		
C	1,0	5,6,2	9,7,0	4,1	5,2	3,7,0	D	1,0	5,6,3	0,2,0	4,1	5,2	4,2,0

### VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

At the intersection of the first paved sidewalk with the paved access road, proceed north along the eastern curb of the access road 425' to a point, thence east parallel with the brick wall 175', thence 150' south along the eastern curb of the sidewalk to a point, thence east 75' parallel with south end of Cuvilly Hall to a point, thence 150' south along the brick wall to the northern end of Wilkie Apartments, thence in a curve along the northern curb of the sidewalk 250' west to the point of origin.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

# 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Cecil N. McKithan, Historian

ORGANIZATION

National Park Service - Historic Sites Survey

DATE

September 8, 1977

STREET & NUMBER

1100 L Street, N.W.

TELEPHONE

202-523-5466

CITY OR TOWN

Washington,

STATE

D. C. 20240

# 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL     

STATE     

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

LOCAL: Landmark  
 Designated: Nov. 13, 1976  
 Boundary Certified: Sept 27, 1977

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

9/8/82

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

((NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS))

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**CONTINUATION SHEET**

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The chandeliers were originally lit by gas from a gas works built by Ralston. The Sisters had them electrified. The beautiful plasterwork designs on the ceiling at the top of each chandelier are examples of a lost art of the nineteenth century called pargeting. The chandeliers were imported from the part of central Europe which is now Czechoslovakia.

The lattice work openings around each room just below the ceiling are part of an ingenious ventilating system which draws air in through louvres under the eaves and circulates it through the walls, keeping them dry, cool, and free of termites and dry rot.

BALLROOM

This Hall of Mirrors furnished the setting for what were known as the host's "lavish nights," occasions which were frequently used to transact much business both before or after extravagant midnight suppers.

The three chandeliers are suspended from an oval frosted glass skylight. Each fixture is different but all are harmonious. The fourteen large mirrors create an illusion of space and elegance. The floor is patterned with alternating boards of maple and walnut butted so closely that they are still tight a century later. The original square nails were counter-sunk and capped with matching plugs of wood. Floor patterns vary from room to room.

In the manner of a riverboat all doors in the guest area of the mansion slide sideways or up into the walls or open flat against the walls to permit an unimpeded flow of guests. The use of skylights throughout the house gives a light airiness to the inner rooms.

CIPRIANI ROOM

Adjoining the ballroom is a drawing room believed to be the central room of the original Cipriani villa which Ralston incorporated into his home. To support this theory are three deviations from the general pattern throughout the rest of the house: 1) the fireplace is Italian marble instead of the laurel wood of the other fireplaces; 2) the ceiling is painted and there is no ventilating system around the top; 3) the floor is narrow-sawed cedar.

In this room is the original Ralston piano. Made of koa wood from the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaii) by the Jacob Zech Company of San Francisco, the piano was unusual in its day because it was made in the harp-shape rather than the square grands which were popular at that time. It is one of three identical pianos made for Mr. Ralston. One was in the Palace Hotel and was destroyed in the earthquake-fire. One was in his San Francisco home and is now owned by descendants of the Zech family.

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BREAKFAST ROOM

Opening off the Cipriani Room is a light, airy room with a complete wall of windows. Presently used as a small dining room, the room was probably either a music room or a billiard room, as a visitor to Belmont in Ralston's day writes that "surrounding the ballroom were the library, billiard room, music room and banquet hall." The beautiful fireplace is of laurel wood, as are the other fireplaces on the main floor. However this fireplace is the only one that is completely decorative as there is no chimney.

SUN PARLOR

The same writer observed, "Another feature was a glassed-in promenade, decorated with potted vines and flowering trees just like those found on elaborately equipped river steamers. Everywhere about the reconstructed villa were gadgets reminiscent of Ralston's river year. The covers of ventilators were intricately carved; the doors swing both in and out; their glazed panels were as handsomely etched with conventionalized flower designs as any found on the Mississippi's floating palaces."

LIBRARY

This charming small room with its laurel wood book cupboards and large laurel fireplace afforded a quiet retreat for a reader. Even in so small a room there is a pretty chandelier as well as an interesting pattern in the floor. Two sets of double doors and an archway provide access from the inner hall, the drawing room, and the sun parlor, to this room.

DRAWING ROOM

In this room the influence of "steamboat Gothic" is most evident. The curved "prow" and the orange peel doors moving smoothly in a curved metal track are certainly copied from the riverboats. In her book, California, An Intimate History, Gertrude Atherton, a contemporary of Ralston, reminisces about a visit of Anson Burlingame, then Secretary of State, to Belmont as a guest of Mr. Ralston. Mr. Burlingame was escorted into this room where a large company was gathered in his honor. To quote, "All the guests faced one way. A few moments passed. All knew that some sort of a surprise was in store, and felt that Ralston's originality could be relied upon. Suddenly the opposite wall gave a sort of shiver, then rose slowly like the curtain of a theater, revealing an immense banqueting-hall laden with the most splendid plate, china, and glass that had been brought to California at that period, and an almost limitless variety of flowers and fruits. As motionless as an army about to salute were the pigtailed Chinese."

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DINING ROOM

The focal point of this magnificent banquet hall is the strikingly modern clock in the mirror over the buffet. The herringbone pattern of the floor and the tripartite ceiling with its pargeting and candle-style chandeliers (rather than the globes of the foyer and ballroom) are noteworthy. Three sets of double doors lead to two pantries and the hall to the kitchen while a fourth set of doors in the corner conceals a massive, hand-forged safe.

STAIRCASE

The grand staircase mounts from the foyer to the second floor and the gallery overlooking the entrance to the ballroom. On the stair walls opposite each other are pictures from Ralston's own collection. In a massive carved frame, reputedly executed by the grandfather of the present Mr. Gump of San Francisco, is an oil painting by Gilbert Munger, dated 1868, of Minnehaha Falls in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Opposite this picture is an oil painting, artist unknown, of the Duke of Wellington.

GALLERY

Reminiscent of an opera house is the gallery with its six semi-circular "opera boxes" overlooking the entrance and the ballroom. Silver-plated railings and marble balustrades carry the elegance of the main floor upstairs. The sliding door at the entrance to the gallery has two beautiful panels of etched glass with mythological goddesses, fruits and flowers as the theme. In the gallery will be found Mr. Ralston's personal desk, a gift to the Sisters in 1974 from the present-day owner; the Hazeltine statue of Freedom which was in the ballroom in Ralston's time and remained in the house through its various owners. In the gallery, as throughout the home, are fine pieces of furniture and objets d'art.

CARRIAGE HOUSE

Of the extensive outbuildings around Ralston Hall in the 1860's (turkish bath, bowling alley, barns, water tower, gas works, greenhouses, servants' quarters) only the carriage house remains. Built in about 1874 to replace an earlier wooden barn which burned, the carriage house walls are four-feet thick, built of native stone quarried in the area. A unique feature is the suspended ceiling of 1 x 10 planks on edge, hung by cables, to permit an unobstructed area for carriages to maneuver.

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attack, or whether he intended suicide as many detractors say, he died in the Bay. The coroner's report showed no water in the lungs, however, so the probably cause was a heart attack, induced by the combination of emotional strain, heat, and the cold waters of the Bay. He was 49 years old. After his death an examination of his correspondence revealed the extent of his philanthropies, and his extraordinary help to the needy of the City he loved. An estimated 50,000 people attended his funeral.

Subsequently Senator Sharon took over Ralston Hall. In the alcove of the ballroom his daughter, Flora, became the bride of Lord Fermor-Hesketh. After Sharon's death the house was sold to Mrs. Alpheus Bull who established a school, Radcliffe Hall, for young ladies. In 1900 the house was sold to Dr. A. M. Gardner, Superintendent of the Napa State Hospital, who established a private sanitarium for the mentally ill. After his death in 1913 the Sanitarium declined and closed about 1918. The Sisters of Notre Dame purchased the property in 1922 as a site for the relocation of their San Jose college. Under their care the house has been restored to much of its original elegance.



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Verbal Boundary Description - (Continued)

This boundary includes an extensive carriage house constructed by Ralston ~~and~~ is of historical significance.

*Wherry*