

**Michael Baker**

**I N T E R N A T I O N A L**

May 7, 2026

Megan Wooley-Ousdahl, AICP, Deputy City Manager  
City of South San Francisco  
City Manager's Office  
400 Grand Avenue, South San Francisco, CA 94080

**RE: HISTORIC ANALYSIS OF THE SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO HILLSIDE SIGN REPAINTING PROJECT,  
SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO, SAN MATEO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA**

Dear Megan:

At the request of the City of South San Francisco (City), Michael Baker International, Inc. (Michael Baker) has prepared this memorandum to provide a historic assessment of the South San Francisco Hillside Sign Repainting Project (Project) in South San Francisco, San Mateo County, California. The Project, which is being initiated by the City, proposes to temporarily apply a new coat of red, white, and blue paint to the concrete letters comprising the South San Francisco Hillside Sign in celebration of the United States' Semiquincentennial. The sign letters would be repainted to their existing and historic color—white—later in 2026.

The South San Francisco Hillside Sign is a designated historical resource. The sign was listed in the National Register of Historic Places (National Register) in 1996; resources that are listed in the National Register are also automatically listed in the California Register of Historical Resources (California Register). Pursuant to South San Francisco Municipal Code (SSFMC) § 2.56.130, proposed alterations to designated historical resources are subject to the City's Certificate of Alteration (COA) process. Historical resources also fall within the purview of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

Generally, projects that conform to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation (SOI Standards) are considered historically compatible. This memorandum has been prepared to provide an evaluation of the proposed Project against the SOI Standards, pursuant to the COA and CEQA processes.

In summary, it is Michael Baker's professional opinion that the Project, as proposed, conforms with the SOI Standards because the temporary application of hued paint to already-painted concrete surfaces constitutes regular maintenance, is reversible, and will not materially impair or otherwise impair the historical resource. Our analysis to this end is included in the following sections.

## **RESOURCE SUMMARY**

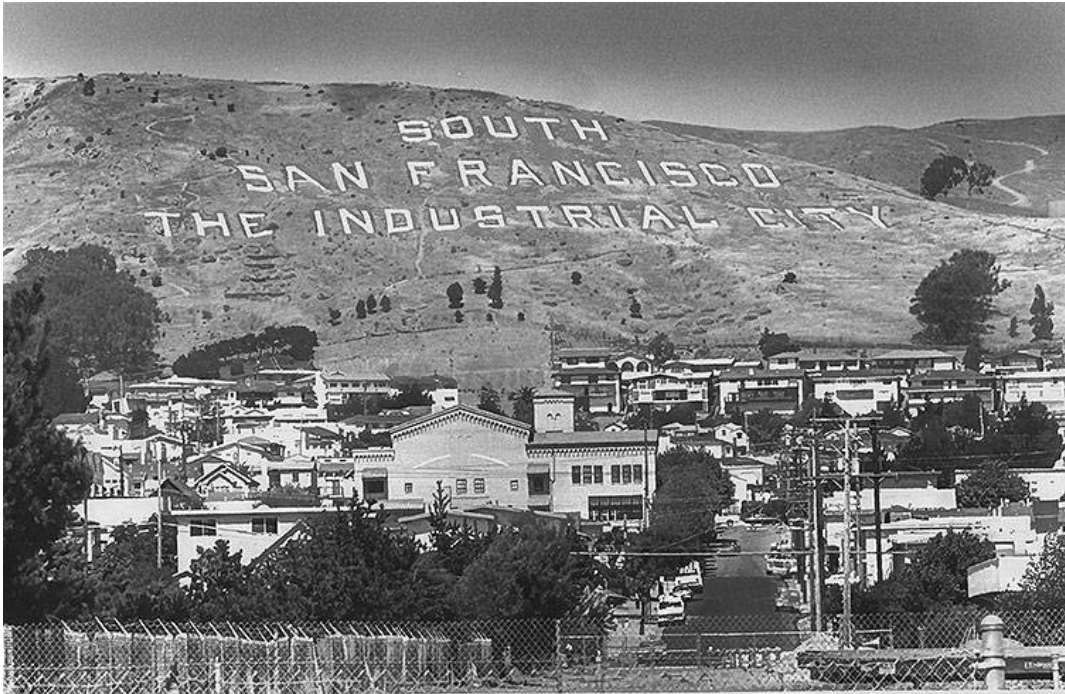
The South San Francisco Hillside Sign is located near the northern city limit of South San Francisco and anchors Sign Hill Park, a public open space at the base of the San Bruno Mountains. The sign comprises large block letters that are composed of Gunite (sprayed concrete) and spell "SOUTH/SAN FRANCISCO/THE INDUSTRIAL CITY" (**Figure 1**). The sign letters, which were historically—and are currently—painted white, vary in size (48-65' tall and 10-23' wide) but appear uniform due to their anamorphic arrangement on the contoured hillside.

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The sign was installed by the South San Francisco Chamber of Commerce in 1929 as a means of advertising the city and its embrace of industry. In 1996, the sign was listed in the National Register under Criterion A for its association with broad patterns of economic history and civic boosterism. The period of significance was identified as 1929-1946 (Goldenberg and Carroll 1996). The sign is also listed in the California Register, as all resources in California that are listed in the National Register are automatically listed in the California Register (OHP 2001).

The sign is owned by the City of South San Francisco and is maintained by the City's Parks and Recreation Department.



*Figure 1. South San Francisco Hillside Sign as viewed from the south, 1987 (National Park Service)*

## REGULATORY SETTING

By virtue of its listing in the National Register and California Register, the South San Francisco Hillside Sign is subject to the City's COA process, and also meets the definition of a "historical resource" for purposes of CEQA. The SOI Standards are used as the baseline standard of review for each program. A summary of each applicable regulatory program is provided below.

### CITY OF SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO CERTIFICATE OF ALTERATION

The City of South San Francisco administers a local historic preservation program for properties within its jurisdiction, which is codified in SSFMC § 2.56 (Planning Commission). Pursuant to SSFMC § 2.56.130, any project proposing material change to a designated historic resource must first apply for a Certificate of Alteration (COA). The purpose of a COA is to protect the city's historic resources from unnecessary demolition or inappropriate material alteration.

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SSFMC § 2.56.090 defines historic resource as “a structure, a natural feature, or a site which is fifty years old or older, of architectural, artistic, cultural, engineering, aesthetic, archeological, historical, political, or social significance to the citizens of the city of South San Francisco, the state, or the nation” (City of South San Francisco n.d.). As a resource listed in the National Register and California Register, the South San Francisco Hillside Sign has demonstrable significance to the history of South San Francisco and is greater than 50 years of age. The sign therefore meets the City’s definition of a historical resource.

The Planning Commission is the entity responsible for reviewing and approving COA applications. For a COA to be approved, the Planning Commission must make the following findings:

1. The action proposed is consistent with the purposes of this chapter [SSFMC § 2.56.130]; and
2. The action proposed will not be detrimental to a structure or feature having significance as an historic resource; or
3. The applicant has demonstrated that the action is necessary to correct an unsafe or dangerous condition on the property; or
4. The applicant has demonstrated that denial of the application will result in immediate, undue, or substantial hardship because of conditions peculiar to the particular site or improvement.

Generally, it is understood that projects conforming to the SOI Standards are historically appropriate. SSFMC § 2.56.130(d) states that the SOI Standards “shall provide base criteria for evaluating proposed alterations to an historic resource” (City of South San Francisco n.d.).

## **CEQA AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES**

Enacted in 1970, CEQA is a state law mandating that state and local governmental entities identify, disclose, and mitigate adverse environmental impacts resulting from proposed projects. Historical resources are considered to be a part of the environment under CEQA; California Public Resources Code (PRC) § 21084.1 states that “[a] project that may cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of an historical resource is a project that may have a significant effect on the environment” (OHP 2001).

CEQA considers the following to meet the definition of a historical resource (OHP 2001):

- Properties that are listed in the California Register
- Properties that have been determined eligible for listing in the California Register by the State Historical Resources Commission
- Properties that are included in a local historic register

Since the South San Francisco Hillside Sign is listed in the National Register and is also listed in the California Register, it meets the definition of a “historical resource” for purposes of CEQA.

Certain classes of projects are understood to not have significant environmental impacts and are categorically exempt from standard CEQA review. The Class 31 CEQA Exemption, which is addressed in § 15331 of the CEQA Guidelines, applies to projects “limited to maintenance, repair, stabilization, rehabilitation, restoration, preservation, conservation or reconstruction of historical resources in a manner consistent with the [SOI Standards]” (OHP 2001).

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### **SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR’S STANDARDS**

The SOI Standards are a set of technical standards developed by the National Park Service (NPS) to broadly guide the treatment of historic properties. The SOI Standards are nationally accepted as a best practice and are widely used at the federal, state, and local levels to assess the historic compatibility of proposed interventions to historic buildings and other resources.

The SOI Standards address four treatment approaches, each of which guides certain types of projects involving historical resources: preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction. Rehabilitation—which is defined as “the act or process of making possible a compatible use for a property through repair, alterations, and additions while preserving those portions or features which convey its historical, cultural, or architectural values”—is the most common treatment approach and is most applicable to the proposed Project (Weeks and Grimmer 1995).

There are ten SOI Standards for Rehabilitation, as follows:

1. A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces and spatial relationships.
2. The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.
3. Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will not be undertaken.
4. Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained and preserved.
5. Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved.
6. Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match the old in design, color, texture and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.
7. Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials will not be used.
8. Archaeological resources will be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures will be undertaken.
9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.
10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

### **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

The Project, which is being proposed by the City, entails temporarily repainting the concrete sign letters red, white, and blue in celebration of the United States’ Semiquincentennial, the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of

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the signing of the Declaration of Independence (**Figure 2**). The red, white, and blue paint would remain until the fall of 2026, at which point the sign letters would again be repainted white. The scope of work is limited to the temporary application of new paint and would not involve any other material changes to the historic resource. Prior to repainting the letters, the City will remove brush around the sign letters and will mark areas that contain sensitive habitat to avoid disturbance.

The proposed paint colors are identified as Old Glory Red, White, and Old Glory Blue, which are the official colors of the American flag (**Figure 3**).

The sign letters are typically repainted white every two to three years by City staff and volunteers and are due to be repainted this year. The Project schedule coincides with the overall maintenance schedule for the sign.



*Figure 2. Mockup of the proposed Project (City of South San Francisco)*

Old Glory Red Color Codes		White Color Codes		Old Glory Blue Color Codes	
Hex	B31942	Hex	FFFFFF	Hex	0A3161
RGB	179, 25, 66	RGB	255, 255, 255	RGB	10, 49, 97
CMYK	0, 100, 66, 13	CMYK	0, 0, 0, 0	CMYK	100, 68, 0, 54
Pantone	193	Pantone	N. A.	Pantone	281
RAL	3027	RAL	N. A.	RAL	5026
<a href="#">Download</a>		<a href="#">Download</a>		<a href="#">Download</a>	

*Figure 3. Proposed colors selected for the Project (City of South San Francisco)*

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### ANALYSIS

Michael Baker concludes that the proposed Project conforms to the SOI Standards, as discussed below in the following analysis of the proposed scope of work against each of the ten standards.

*Standard 1. A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces and spatial relationships.*

The Project does not propose a change of use for the historic resource which was constructed as signage and will continue to be used as such. The Project meets Standard 1.

*Standard 2. The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.*

The Project is limited to the application of new paint to the historic resource, which consists concrete sign letters that have historically been, and are currently, painted. The application of new paint over existing paint is a maintenance-related task that will not require the removal of any distinctive materials, features, spaces, or spatial relationships. The sign letters will remain fully intact, and the relationship between the sign and the surrounding community will be maintained. The Project meets Standard 2.

*Standard 3. Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will not be undertaken.*

The Project does not propose the addition of any new features or elements from other historic properties that could create a false sense of historical development. The Project meets Standard 3.

*Standard 4. Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained and preserved.*

The Project does not propose changes to any features associated with the historic resource that may have acquired historic significance in their own right. The Project meets Standard 4.

*Standard 5. Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved.*

The historic resource is characterized by its Gunitite (sprayed concrete) construction, anamorphic configuration, high visibility, large block lettering, and painted finish. The Project, which is limited to the application of new paint to concrete surfaces that have historically been painted, would not compromise these distinctive features, all of which would be preserved. The Project meets Standard 5.

*Standard 6. Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match the old in design, color, texture and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.*

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The Project does not propose the replacement of missing features or any material changes to the concrete sign letters apart from the application of a new coat of paint over surfaces that have always been painted, thereby constituting regular maintenance. The proposed red, white, and blue palette is a minor and temporary intervention, and the sign letters will be repainted white – their historic color – later in 2026 at the end of the Semiquincentennial. The Project meets Standard 6.

*Standard 7. Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials will not be used.*

The scope of the Project is limited to repainting concrete surfaces that have historically been painted and have regularly been repainted for purposes of maintenance. The application of new paint constitutes a minor maintenance task that is gentle and will not require the use of any chemical or physical treatments that could cause damage to the Gunite sign. The Project meets Standard 7.

*Standard 8. Archaeological resources will be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures will be undertaken.*

The scope of the Project is limited to the application of new paint to the sign letters and does not propose any activities that would result in ground disturbance. The Project meets Standard 8.

*Standard 9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.*

The proposed scope of work associated with the Project is limited to the application of new paint and does not include any new additions or related new construction. The Project meets Standard 9.

*Standard 10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.*

The application of a variegated palette of red, white and blue paint to concrete signage that was historically painted white would result in a discernible, albeit temporary visual change to the historic resource. However, the application of new paint to a surface that is already painted constitutes a minor alteration that is easily reversible with the application of new paint that emulates the current color palette. The timeline of the Project is temporary and limited to a period of months; as noted, the proposed scope of work calls for the sign letters to once again be repainted white – their historic color – in Fall 2026. The historic sign will retain its essential form and integrity throughout the repainting process, which involves only superficial surface treatments. The Project meets Standard No. 10.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, Michael Baker has reviewed the proposed Project and has arrived at the following conclusions regarding its historic compatibility:

- The Project, as proposed, conforms to the SOI Standards, per the above analysis. The proposed scope of work is limited to the application of new paint to a concrete surface that has historically

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been painted and regularly repainted; this constitutes typical maintenance and will not materially impair the integrity of the historical resource. The proposed red, white, and blue palette deviates from existing conditions, but this change is easily reversible and the scope of work calls for the sign to be repainted and restored to its original white color later in 2026.

- The Project meets the City's review standard for issuance of a COA. As noted, the proposed scope of work conforms to the SOI Standards and will not be detrimental to the historic sign.
- The Project qualifies for a Class 31 CEQA Exemption because the proposed scope of work is limited to maintenance and conforms to the SOI Standards, per the CEQA Guidelines.

## PREPARER QUALIFICATIONS

This memorandum was prepared by Michael Baker International Senior Architectural Historian Andrew Goodrich, MPL, MHC, AICP. The memorandum was reviewed for quality control by Architectural History Practice Lead Susan Wood, PhD.

**Andrew Goodrich, MPL, MHC, AICP**, is a senior architectural historian with 15 years of experience in historic preservation planning and cultural resources management in California. He meets the Secretary of the Interior's Professional Qualification Standards in the discipline of architectural history. Mr. Goodrich is a skilled researcher and technical writer whose experience includes historic resource evaluations, historic context statements and surveys, archival research, nominations to the National Register of Historic Places and local registers, rehabilitation incentives including the Mills Act, Secretary of the Interior's Standards compliance, CEQA technical reports, and project management. He also has prior experience working for public and nonprofit sector preservation agencies and is an AICP-certified planner.

Sincerely,



Andrew Goodrich, MPL, MHC, AICP  
Senior Architectural Historian

## ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1—National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (1996)

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## REFERENCES

City of South San Francisco. n.d. "Municipal Code." Accessed May 2026. <https://www.ssfca.gov/Departments/City-Clerk/Municipal-Code>.

Goldenberg, Nancy, and Joni Carroll. 1996. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the South San Francisco Hillside Sign. June 12.

National Park Service. 1997. National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation. Accessed May 2026. [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15\\_web508.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf).

Newspapers.com. n.d. General subject search. Digital newspaper collection. Accessed May 2026. <https://www.newspapers.com>.

OHP (California Office of Historic Preservation). 2001. "California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and Historical Resources." *Technical Assistance Series*. No. 1. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Weeks, Kay D., and Anne E. Grimmer. 1995. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring & Reconstructing Historic Buildings. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior.

**Michael Baker**

INTERNATIONAL

## Attachment 1

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (1996)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 96000761

Date Listed: 7/11/96

South San Francisco Hillside Sign  
Property Name

San Mateo  
County

CA  
State

N/A  
Multiple Name

-----  
This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

*Paul R. Lynch*  
Signature of the Keeper

7/11/96  
Date of Action

Amended Items in Nomination:

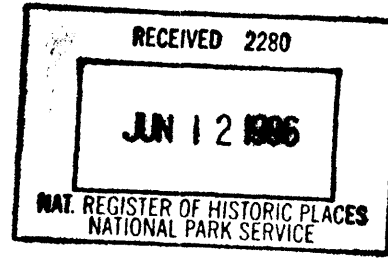
Historic Function:  
The historic functions: Recreation/Culture--Monument/Marker & Recreation/Culture--Work of Art are added to better identify the resource with like properties already listed.

Area of Significance:  
Social History is added as an area of significance.

The amendments noted above reflect an attempt to match the property with other similar properties previously listed in the National Register. The SLR will not affect the State's NR program audit and has been discussed with Cynthia Howse of the CA SHPO.

DISTRIBUTION:  
National Register property file  
Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name South San Francisco Hillside Sign

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

2. Location

street & number Sign Hill Park N/A  not for publication

city or town South San Francisco N/A  vicinity

state California code CA county San Mateo code 081 zip code 94080

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature] 6/6/96  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
State Historic Preservation Officer

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register  See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register  See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register

removed from the National Register

other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper

[Signature] 7/11/96  
Date of Action

---

**5. Classification**

---

**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private  
 public-local  
 public-State  
 public-Federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only one box)

- building(s)  
 district  
 site  
 structure  
 object

**Number of Resources within Property**

Contributing

Noncontributing

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
1  
1

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
0 Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

---

**6. Function or Use**

---

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: Advertising, identification

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: Advertising, identification

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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**7. Description**

---

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

No Style

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation: \_\_\_\_\_

Walls: \_\_\_\_\_

Roof: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: Concrete (Gunite)

**Narrative Description**

(Enter Categories from instructions)

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS)**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: City Boosterism  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1929-1946  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

Kneese, George A.  
Klassen, Robert A.  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Location of Additional Data**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

\_\_\_\_\_

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**10. Geographical Data**

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**Acreage of Property** 41 acres

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing

1 10 551020 4168660

2 10 551605 4168400

Zone Easting Northing

3 10 551580 4168280

4 10 550940 4168360

\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

See attached

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

See attached

---

**11. Form Prepared By**

---

name/title Nancy Goldenberg and Joni Carroll

organization Carey & Co. Inc. date April 11, 1995

street & number 123 Townsend St. 400 telephone (415) 957-0100

city or town San Francisco state California zip code 94107

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**Additional Documentation**

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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**Property Owner**

---

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name City of South San Francisco

street & number P.O. Box 711 telephone (415) 877-8500

city or town South San Francisco state California zip code 94080

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**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Section** 7                      **Page** 1

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South San Francisco Hillside Sign  
San Mateo County, CA

The South San Francisco Hillside Sign reads:

SOUTH  
SAN FRANCISCO  
THE INDUSTRIAL CITY

It consists of large, flat concrete letters, painted white, set on the southern side of a steep, 581 foot high hill, that forms part of the San Bruno Mountains. A series of concrete footings are located higher on the hill, the remainder of an electric sign dating from the 1930s. Both the sign and the foundations are within the 41 acre Sign Hill Park, an area maintained by the city of South San Francisco. Although the foundations are obviously ruins (and are not being counted), the primary sign maintains a high degree of integrity, protected as it is within a relatively undeveloped park setting.

The hillside sign forms three lines on the hill. The first line, reading "SOUTH," is 166 feet long; the second, reading "SAN FRANCISCO," is 484 feet long; and the third, "THE INDUSTRIAL CITY," is 628 feet long. The letters themselves range in height from 48 to 65 feet, in an anamorphic arrangement on the contoured hill to create the illusion, from a distance, of straight, regularly-sized and spaced text. Individual legs of the letters are approximately ten feet wide. Letter width varies from a ten foot wide "I" to a 22 foot, 8 inch wide "S." The thickness of the letters appears to be no more than three or four inches, with approximately two inches on average rising above the ground.

With regular maintenance by the city, the sign is in good condition. One exception is the letter "T" of the word "CITY." The vertical leg has slid 40 inches away from the horizontal cross bar: a problem completely undetectable except while standing on the letter itself. The letters are repainted annually with white paint, and the surrounding area cleared of brush.

Above the sign, on the crest of the hill, stand the foundation from the electrical sign. The foundations consist of 35 concrete footings, each 18" square, arranged in a double row approximately 400 feet long. The footings vary in height from approximately one foot to approximately three feet. Nothing else remains of this sign. These footings, as remnants that lack integrity, are not being counted as a resource.

Other elements within the park include unpaved footpaths that zig-zag up the steep hill, and a concrete bench at the crest of the hill. There are no other man-made features within the park.

Sign Hill Park is steep, barren and relatively undeveloped. Vegetation consists primarily of grasses, with coyote bush, crimson sage, and California poppy. Pampas grass currently grows beneath the sign; it is soon to be replaced by native manzanita. There are no trees near the sign, but trees within the park include pine, eucalyptus, live oak and acacia.

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**Summary Paragraph**

The South San Francisco Sign is eligible for the National Register under criterion A for its importance in promoting South San Francisco's ties with industry. In 1923 during the post-war boom, the local Chamber of Commerce decided to advertise the city's welcoming attitude toward industry on a hillside overlooking the city. The first whitewashed sign, reading "South San Francisco the Industrial City," was replaced six years later by a larger, more permanent sign bearing the same message. The choice of a hillside sign to advertise the city can be seen as an outgrowth of two civic boosting traditions: the electric Main Street slogan sign, and the hillside letter.

In addition, the sign may be eligible in the context of aviation history. In 1929, the Daniel Guggenheim Fund for the Promotion of Aeronautics awarded a certificate to the city. The award, signed by Charles Lindbergh, was for having "completed the work of identification for the service of aerial navigation." More research is required to develop this context.

**Statement of Significance**

South San Francisco was planned as an industrial suburb in the tradition of Homestead, Pennsylvania and Pullman and East St. Louis, Illinois. Encouraged by their successful development of South Omaha into a bustling city centered on the meat-packing industry, some of the country's largest meat-packing companies (known as the Beef Trust) planned to repeat the success of South Omaha on the periphery of San Francisco. This plan, instigated by G.F. Swift in 1888, included a community of separate meat-packing companies around common stock yards and a town for the employees. Swift chose a site near Baden (an earlier community) for his industrial experiment: it was close enough to the market and labor pool of San Francisco and yet far enough away to ensure cheap land, low taxes and a virtual monopoly on local politics. Because other Swift plants were in "South Chicago" and "South Omaha," Swift reputedly favored the name "South San Francisco."

In 1890, Peter Iler, an agent of the Beef Trust, purchased a portion of Rancho Buri Buri, the original Mexican land grant covering more than 15,000 acres south of the San Bruno Mountains. In 1891 the South San Francisco Land and Improvement Company became owner of the land, which was then divided into industrial and residential districts. The South San Francisco Land and Improvement Company financed lighting, sewer connections, and water distribution to all homes. A second corporate body, known after 1894 as the Western Meat Company, took over eighty acres of bay-front land for stock yards and a meat-packing plant. In December 1892 the new \$2.5 million meat-packing facility opened. Other industries followed the meat packers to South San Francisco: the Steiger Terra Cotta and Pottery Works, and the Baden Brick company in 1894; the paint manufacturer W.P. Fuller & Company, the Molath Brick Company, and the South San Francisco Lumber company in 1898 (*La Peninsula*, May 1971); and the Pacific Jupiter Steel Company in 1903.

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In December 1907, construction was completed on the "Bayshore Railway Cutoff," and South San Francisco was finally on the main rail line to San Francisco, with tracks conveniently located at the western edge of the factory district. At the same time, the Guggenheim-owned Copper Trust's intended smelter on San Bruno Point was successfully opposed by San Mateo County but supported by the townspeople. This clash with the county led to the incorporation of South San Francisco in 1908. After incorporation, more industries moved to South San Francisco, including Pacific Coast Steel, and Morgan Oyster Company in 1909, Shaw Batcher Steel Company in 1913, American Marble and Mosaic Works and Enterprise Foundry in 1914, and Growers Rice in 1916. (Kauffman 1976: 27.)

Growth continued through the 1920s. A new City Hall, designed by Werner & Coffey and built at a cost of \$125,000, opened on November 11, 1920. The following newspaper editorial from the *Enterprise* describes the city's industrial scene just prior to construction of the Hillside Sign in the mid 1920s:

South San Francisco is advancing impressively in industry. The Pacific Coast Steel company is well started on a million dollar program of improvements and enlargements. The Marchetti Motor Patents Inc. has purchased 100 acres of land for a factory here. The Cook Oil company has started actual construction of the plant on Linden avenue. The Metal and Thermit corporation has announced plans for a new \$100,000 addition; the brass foundry of the Enterprise Foundry company will be in operation here next week; the Western Pipe and Steel company is spending \$40,000 on a new tube mill; and the Pacific Gas and Electric company has approved plans and appropriated the money for an \$8,000 office building. These developments, coming together, are making this period one of the greatest in South San Francisco's industrial history. Now let us advertise the fact to the world that we are an industrial city. (*The Enterprise*, September 7, 1928)

**1923: The First Sign**

The idea for the hillside sign as an advertisement for the city of South San Francisco originated with the local Chamber of Commerce, which built the first, whitewashed sign in 1923 at a cost of \$300. Because of the steep, varying slope and the rough terrain, the mapping out of each letter required a surveyor's skill. City Engineer George A. Kneese placed each letter so that the size and spacing were consistent when viewed from a distance (*The Enterprise*, Nov. 1, 1923). Each letter was carved out of the hillside and a mixture of lime, white cement and water was applied. When the large letter "U" was laid out on the hillside, it gave rise to much speculation around South San Francisco (*The Enterprise*, Oct 18, 1923); it was of course the central letter of the word "SOUTH." The whitewashed letters were complete by November 22, 1923, (*The Enterprise*, Nov. 22, 1923), in time for the opening of the nearby Tanforan Race Track season. The sign spelled out the same message that the concrete letters do today:

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SOUTH  
SAN FRANCISCO  
THE INDUSTRIAL CITY

This first sign received national attention when it was published in Popular Mechanics magazine. Valued locally, the first sign was well maintained, with local high school boys hired at 40 cents per hour to remove grass overgrowth and apply fresh whitewash.

**1929: The Second Sign**

Five years after installing the whitewashed sign, the South San Francisco Chamber of Commerce began to promote a more permanent, concrete sign. The original sign needed ongoing whitewashing, which eventually resulted in irregular letters; a new concrete sign would straighten the letters and reduce maintenance. Between coatings of whitewash, the original sign was hard to read and was characterized by the Chamber of Commerce as "intermittent advertising"; a permanent concrete sign would advertise the city "day and night from now on" (*The Enterprise*, March 23, 1928). As with the whitewashed sign, the goal of the concrete sign was to attract more industries and more potential homeowners to "The Industrial City."

To maximize its advertising potential, the new sign was planned for the same site as the whitewashed sign. The location and orientation of the hillside meant that the sign could be viewed by increased traffic on El Camino Real, Skyline Boulevard (now Pacific Scenic Parkway), and the new Bayshore highway (now Highway 101), as well as by train passengers and aviators from nearby Mills Field (now San Francisco International Airport). The privileged perspective point, however, was the popular Tanforan Race Track on El Camino Real.

A Chamber of Commerce committee, composed of E.C. Peck, chairman, W. H. Dinning, H. L. Haaker and B. H. Truax, formed to plan the financing of the new sign. When the cost of installing the concrete sign was estimated at \$5,000, this was deemed too great a burden on the membership of the organization. On Jan. 28, 1928, the Board of Directors requested City Council to place a proposition on the April ballot to publicly fund a new permanent sign. They succeeded, and Proposition 1 read as follows: "the proposition to levy a special tax of seven (7) cents on each one hundred dollars (\$100.00) of the property assessed ... within the City of South San Francisco for the purpose of raising the sum of Five Thousand Dollars (\$5,000.00) to be expended for constructing in said City a concrete hillside sign in said City to advertise South San Francisco the Industrial City."

Many prominent citizens and citizens' groups supported the proposition, including the Women's Club of South San Francisco and the Exchange Club. The Rev. W.S. Kelly, pastor of St. Paul's, signed his weekly column in the *Enterprise* newspaper "Sincerely yours for the Big Sign on the Mountain Side." The Chamber of Commerce held a rally at City Hall on April 4, 1928, where Chamber president E. P. Kauffman, vice

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president I.H. Potter, directors B.H. Truax and J.G. Walker, Mayor A.J. Eschelbach, Supervisor T.L. Hickey, County Tax Collector Ambrose McSweeney, and Councilman Andrew Hynding proclaimed the merits of the permanent sign and encouraged support of the proposition (*The Enterprise*, April 7, 1928). Despite this support, the proposition failed to acquire the requisite two-thirds majority by a narrow margin.

The supporters of the concrete hillside sign felt that "if submitted to the people on a ballot by itself it would carry" (*The Enterprise*, May 4, 1928). Editorials in the July 13 and 27, 1928, issues of *The Enterprise* support the Hillside sign and the calling of a special election. The July 27 editorial states "South San Francisco will yet have its Hillside Sign, advertising this city to the motorists of three arterial highways leading to San Francisco...It will be a land mark to the Mills Field aviators, and when it is built, South San Francisco will be on the map in large letters." (*The Enterprise*, July 27, 1928)

The special election was set for September 11, 1928, and it passed with over two-thirds majority. Work commenced immediately and on October 1, 1928, plans and specifications for the work were presented to City Council by Robert Klassen, the assistant city engineer. The plans called for letters 48 feet high, giving a 23 foot height in perspective. The overall size of the three horizontal lines was to be 186, 480 and 628 feet respectively, about one-third longer than the whitewashed sign. The new sign was to be made using Gunitite, a new process in 1928, by which cement is applied through a pressure gun to a reinforcing of steel wire. A brush coat of Portland cement was also specified.

The outlines of the letters were laid out by a field party stationed at Tanforan Race Track, now the site of the Tanforan Shopping Center, creating perspective-corrected letters on the steep hillside. In the late fall of 1928, the South San Francisco Land and Improvement Company transferred land title to the city for the construction and maintenance of the sign and to create a surrounding public park.

Bids were opened by the City Council on Jan. 7, 1929, and were rejected as too high (*The Enterprise*, Jan 11, 1929). But by April 15, 1929, the *Enterprise* newspaper could happily announce that "After two elections, an unsatisfactory call for bids and several other long delays the contract to build South San Francisco's hillside sign was let Monday night to the Cement Gun Construction company of San Francisco at a figure of \$4,845." The concrete sign was completed May 15, 1929.

**1932: The Electric Sign**

A 388-foot long electric advertising sign was constructed by G. H. Thompson atop San Bruno Mountain in 1932, slightly higher and further west than the South San Francisco concrete sign. At the time of its construction it was claimed as the largest electrical sign in the world: 388 feet long, containing 6,000 light bulbs and 25,000 reflector lenses. Mounted on a large skeleton framework set on piers on top of the hill, it was lit only after dark. There were 14 separate and distinct flashes in different patterns and colors, alternating between South San Francisco and 14 other sponsors. The message changed every 15 seconds, advertising

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"South San Francisco The Industrial City," and such slogans as "Drink Acme Beer," "Buy Bakery Goods," "White King Washes Everything," and "Maxwell House Coffee - Good to the Last Drop." On a clear night, it was visible for miles. It was turned off in 1939 when the threat of war created the possibility of its becoming a beacon for attack on the airport. Only the concrete foundations remain today.

**Signage as a City Boosting Vehicle**

The South San Francisco Sign was seen as both a means of advertising, and as a symbol of the city's identity. It has served in this latter capacity to the present day. Speaking at a public rally in 1928 in support of the ballot measure to finance the sign, I. H. Potter, member of the Chamber of Commerce, made the following remarks:

We are continually confused with 'butchertown' in San Francisco, and the one way to separate our city from southern San Francisco is to give ourselves a name plate such as the Hillside Sign. It is a means of identifying ourselves. Air travelers who embark from Mills Field will know where South San Francisco is and that it is proud enough to advertise itself...This is a day of advertising, and the Hillside Sign is one means of getting our name before the world at a nominal cost. (The Enterprise, April 6, 1928)

The choice of a grandiose sign as a city boosting vehicle dates almost to the turn of the century. It has its antecedents in both the large, electric slogan signs which crowned many Main Streets (Modesto, Burlingame, and Redwood City, among other California communities, had these), and in the single, gigantic hillside letters, typically constructed of whitewashed stones or of concrete, which adorn hillsides near many cities and towns in the American West. These letters, which flourished between the years 1905 and 1915, were most often constructed and maintained by university students. The first such letter - and one certainly familiar to the citizens of South San Francisco because of its proximity, was the seventy-foot high "C" in the Berkeley Hills. University of California freshman and sophomore students constructed this symbol from a six-inch thick slab of concrete (Parsons 1988:16).

Perhaps the most similar sign in California is the more famous but less intact "Hollywood" sign. In 1923, the year the first South San Francisco sign was carefully whitewashed on the hillside, a sign reading "Hollywoodland" was built to promote a subdivision of the same name along Beachwood Canyon. The sign consisted of 50 foot high metal letters, each supported on a wood and metal framework. Each letter was originally studded with 20-watt lightbulbs. In 1949, the "land" letters were removed and the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce took over maintenance. Declared a city landmark in 1973, it was completely reconstructed in 1978 (Chronicle, April 17, 1995).

**The Chamber of Commerce**

The local Chamber of Commerce, the organization originating the Hillside Sign concept, was an agency

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developed specifically to promote commerce and industry within the community. Created in 1913, the organization engaged in a wide variety of promotional activities. Its campaigns in the 'teens and '20s included developing a system to license peddlers and solicitors in 1913; convincing the city Board of Trustees to install sidewalks in 1918; endorsing displaying "South San Francisco" on road signs in 1921; and petitioning Pacific Gas and Electric Co. to construct a building in South San Francisco (Feuerstein 1989). Other organizations devoted to promoting South San Francisco at the time include The Manufacturer's Association, the Women's Club, the Land and Improvement Company and the Exchange Club.

The South San Francisco Chamber of Commerce also prepared "City Boosterism" publications during the 1920s. One such publication, *South San Francisco The Industrial City*, which came out simultaneously with the construction of the second sign, extolls the virtues of South San Francisco. In addition to describing each of the major industries operating in South San Francisco at the time of publication, the pamphlet includes descriptions of the transportation system, labor force, residential real estate opportunities, and photos of the City Hall, Schools, Churches, the Public Library, and the Southern Pacific Station. The publication was evidently directed at potential new industries, as this forward by then Mayor Eshelbach relates:

The basis of South San Francisco's growth and prosperity is its industries and the policy of the administration is to foster and encourage development. This policy has and is producing results.

The Board of Trustees of South San Francisco, by its co-operative action, invites and welcomes new industries, and stands ready to serve you in the establishment of your plant at South San Francisco. (SSF Chamber of Commerce c.1928)

**The Sign's Impact and South San Francisco's Recent Past**

The signs, and related "City Boosting" activities were evidently successful. South San Francisco was able to maintain 35 industrial operations through the depression of the 1930s - only one fewer than in 1928. Of these, four were meat-packing businesses, six were iron or steel plants and four were manufacturers of mechanical equipment. Other industries included two large paint factories, three other chemical works, three food packing establishments, two makers of airplane parts, a smelter for precious metals, and a manufacturer of radio equipment, in addition to industries producing lime, pottery, and printers' ink. (*La Peninsula*, May 1971)

During the Second World War, the factories of South San Francisco participated in the biggest boom in shipbuilding in the nation's history. The Western Pipe and Steel shipyard grew from 3,000 employees in 1941 to 15,594 in 1944. Bethlehem Steel turned out steel plate for Western Pipe and other shipyards. Barrett & Hilp began construction of concrete barges at the Belair shipyard in South San Francisco. Other industries, such as Swift and Armour, South San Francisco meat packers, also shifted to wartime production.

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The postwar years witnessed the abandonment of smokestack industries and unparalleled growth in light industry, warehousing, and residential development (Kauffman 1976:27). At the end of the Second World War the nation's economy was moving away from manufacturing to service industries; in South San Francisco, this led to the closing of its major manufacturers, including steel and meat packing. With the blessing of city government, a developer blasted away an 80-acre, solid rock hill and filled the adjacent marshlands. No smokestack industries, such as slaughterhouses, were planned for the new industrial park, but rather research and development, light industry, transportation, and wholesale trade. Later developments followed, including highrise structures, yacht harbors, hotels, and the establishment of the biotechnology giant, Genentech.

In 1986, South San Francisco's Historic Preservation Commission designated Sign Hill a historic resource. The ruling led to heated debate over whether the Sign was still relevant. Television and newspaper coverage was extensive, as the longtime residents battled newcomers who regarded the "Industrial" label as demeaning and not befitting their sparkling new edifices. 1300 citizens signed petitions asking the City Council to uphold the Commission. Preservationists who wanted the sign maintained rallied and packed the council's meeting room with more than 200 persons, only one of whom spoke against the sign. The Historic Preservation Commission's decision was upheld unanimously by the City Council.

The South San Francisco Hillside Sign, with its motto "The Industrial City," was built to celebrate the city's industrial beginnings and to promote its future. The sign announced to all the city's pride in its industrial base, and acted as a beacon to welcome new industries to the community.

Authors' note: Uncited material in the above document originated with an earlier draft prepared by Mrs. Edna Harks. Only material that was added to this original draft, or verified by Nancy Goldenberg and Joni Carroll, is cited.

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South San Francisco Hillside Sign  
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**Boundary Description**

Parcel N° 012-351-110, San Mateo County

**Boundary Justification**

The boundary describes Sign Hill Park, a 41-acre municipal park deeded to the city for the South San Francisco Hillside Sign. The boundary and area of Sign Hill Park remain unchanged.

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South San Francisco Hillside Sign  
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This form is based on research by

Mrs. Edna S. Harks

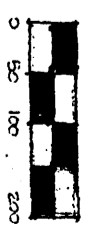
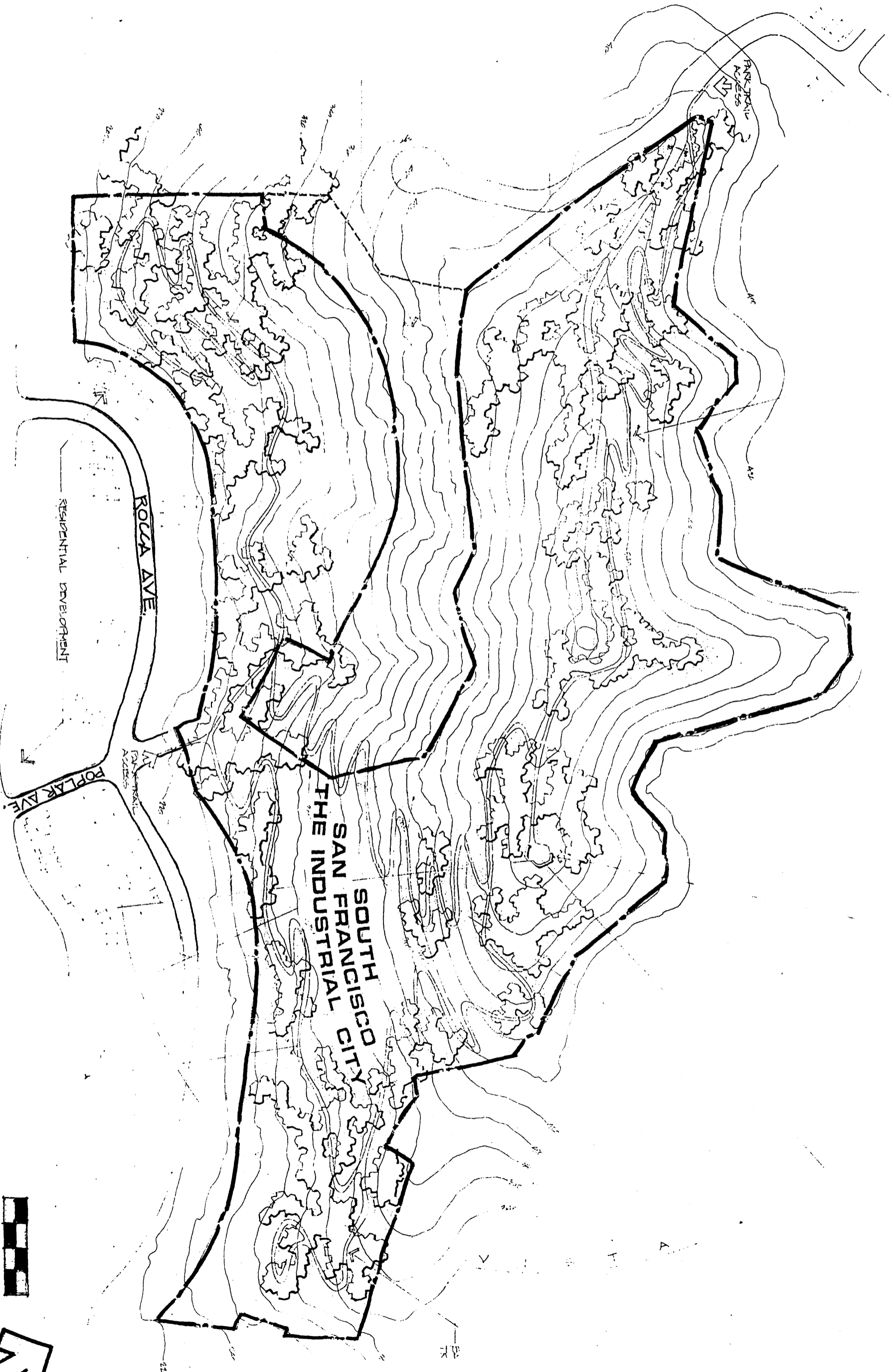
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# SIGN HILL PARK



SCALE



NORTH