

Woman's Club of Palo Alto  
HISTORIC MEMBER WALKING TOUR #3  
By Carolyn Pierce

Welcome to the Woman's Club walking tour! You may either print this as your walking guide or take an armchair tour from the comfort of your home using the photos provided.

The focus of this tour is the 500 block of Ramona Street in Downtown Palo Alto and will open with a brief historic explanation for the structures you will be visiting.

***Start your tour from the steps of City Hall Plaza near the corner of Ramona Street and Hamilton Avenue.***

As you might recall from 4th grade California history, Spanish explorer, Gaspar de Portola, and his men camped under a tall redwood tree on the banks of the San Franciscito Creek just a few blocks from this corner. Today we know that tree as the El Palo Alto. The year was 1769, and Portola claimed the area for Spain.



Subsequent to Portola’s exploratory visit, the area that became Palo Alto developed a distinctly Spanish flavor and was composed of three local ranchos:

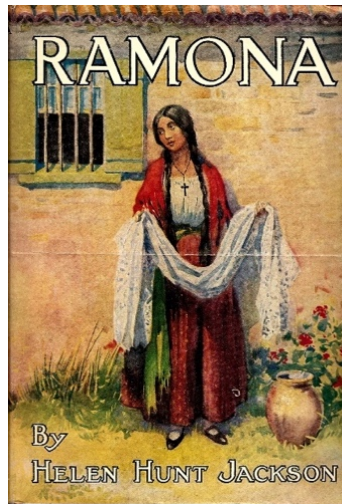
- Rancho Rinconada del Arroyo de San Francisquito
- Rancho Rincon de San Francisquito
- Rancho Robles

As you walk Ramona Street, you’ll notice that this historic Spanish influence has been significant and lasting.



Ramona Street was named after the heroine of a popular 1884 novel by Helen Hunt Jackson aptly entitled Ramona. This spectacularly successful novel was the Harry Potter of its day and stimulated a fascination with the old California of the Spanish era. Before

Ramona was published, the now majority-American population considered the rotting relics of that era as things to be shunned, rather than revered. Jackson's book changed all that, and the Mission Revival style of architecture became all the vogue for several decades. Mission Revival was later joined, and then eclipsed, by the more sophisticated Spanish Colonial Revival style of the early 1920's. Because of these influences, Ramona Street was designed to impart the feel of a lovely, but quaint Spanish village.



Ramona Street is also Palo Alto's response to the City Beautiful Movement. This was an ideal that flourished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the intent of introducing beautification and fine architecture to cities. (The novel, Main Street, by Sinclair Lewis, dramatized this movement.) Advocates of the philosophy believed that such beautification could promote a harmonious social order, which would, in turn, increase the quality of life because it emphasized an aesthetic of order, dignity, and harmony. Ramona Street epitomizes all of these ideals, thus qualifying it to be designated as an Historic Architectural District and listed on the National Register.



Constructed during the big building boom of the 1920's, Ramona Street was purposely designed as a complete, compact little business community in an attempt to divert business and traffic from the University Avenue corridor. It features the work of three well known California architects: William Weeks, Birge Clark, and Pedro de Lemos. In an early booster brochure, the street is described as a "remembrance of Old Spain," so it was largely conceived in the romantic style known as Spanish Colonial Revival.

In the Spanish Colonial style, look for: red roof tiles, stucco or plaster walls, elaborate cast iron ornamentation, and balconies, arches & arcades.

***Now look west across the intersection –***

CARDINAL HOTEL (1924)



The Cardinal Hotel was designed by William Weeks, a California architect who practiced largely in the Monterey area. (A young Palo Alto named Birge Clark was the supervising architect on the job.) This hotel was one of the first buildings on the block and is more classical and formal than the other buildings; yet it works quite well as an anchor to the block because of its simplicity and complementary scale to the building directly across the street. You will visit the interior of this beauty later in our tour.



## THE MEDICO-DENTAL ARTS BUILDING (1927)



Directly across from the Cardinal Hotel is the Medico-Dental Arts Building built in 1927. This was one of the first commissions for renowned Palo Alto architect, Birge Clark. Like the Cardinal Hotel, it is massively scaled and would look rather severe except for the design device Clark used that makes it appear as three separate buildings. The visual interest created by this effect is aided by the detailed ironwork that embroiders the surface, the differing window cadence, and its three unique entries. All in all, this is a very elegant building because of its simple, yet very effective ornamentation.

Both the Cardinal Hotel and the Medico-Dental Arts Building were developed by the Palo Alto Improvement Company, a group composed of Stanford professors and early residents who invested both their time and money in Palo Alto. Many of them were well-educated, and like the women in the Woman's Club, were motivated by a tremendous pride of place. They had a strong desire to make something of their little town, both culturally and aesthetically.



*Now walk northwest down the 500 block of Ramona Street and stop at 535 Ramona.*

535 RAMONA STREET ("NOLA'S") - (1938)



This exuberant Spanish Colonial is the work of Pedro de Lemos. In 1927, it was the last building to be constructed on the block and was completed during the years of the Great Depression. Its broad arched entry seems to invite you into its cool recesses, and the prominent iron balcony above adds a special interest to the structure as it sits above the street. If the gate is open, go deeper into the courtyard so that you can better appreciate the building's charm and human scale. It's even more exceptional in the interior.



Pedro de Lemos was an artistically gifted man who dabbled in many art forms, and as such, he served as the first curator of the Stanford Art Museum. He was not trained as an architect and so approached all of his projects as an artist for whom a building was a three-dimensional canvas. He built several homes for his family in Palo Alto, one of which, 100 Waverley Oaks, is on the National Register. He also designed the Allied Arts Cooperative in Menlo Park, as well as a number of homes in Carmel.

Artistically, de Lemos was caught-up in the Craftsman spirit of his time and rejected the “perfection” of the machine made. Because of this, you’ll notice that he has taken pains to make the handiwork of the artist apparent through adzed beams, hand-placed stones, and lumpy applied stucco. As you return to the street from the courtyard, note the exaggerated use of tile on the entry staircase and on the fountain floor, as well as the absolutely pyrotechnic effect of the pebbles at the entry.

***Cross the street and enter the courtyard at 520 Ramona Street.***

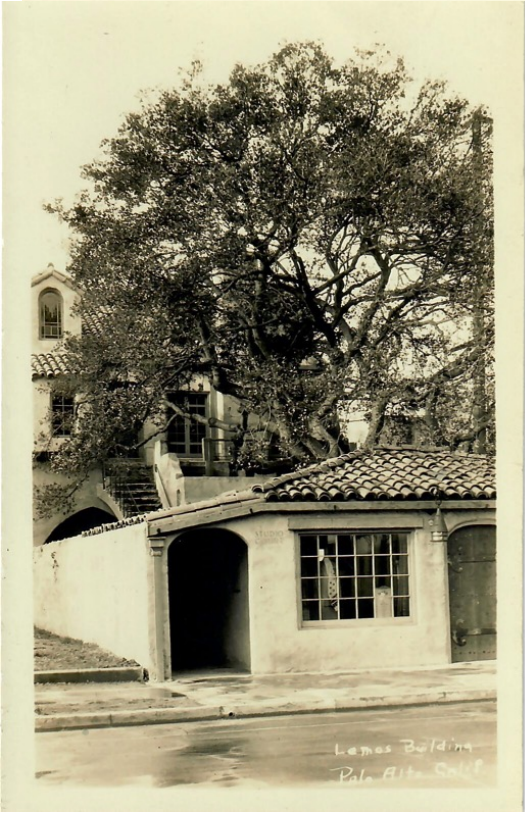
520 RAMONA STREET (1925)



This is our second Pedro de Lemos building, and as the first to be built on the block, set the tone for Ramona Street. Please feel free to enter the courtyard to explore.

This magical courtyard was even more special at its inception because it was designed to wrap around an oak tree that had grown here for hundreds of years. At the time, everyone thought de Lemos was quite eccentric to feature the oak, since land with all of the trees

felled was a special selling point. He was warned that the tree would surely die, but showing himself an early “green” Palo Altan, he refused to remove it. De Lemos told his critics that more of Palo Alto’s trees died from a serious case of “axe-itis,” than from any construction problems. After many decades, the tree ultimately did have to go because instead of the building harming the tree, the tree’s roots were damaging the building. Following are some photos of the building and that early tree:





Even without the tree, de Lemos has incorporated a number of fanciful elements for us to enjoy. The well, a sporting replica of a mission bell, and some of the other decorative elements in the courtyard were built from sandstone rubble (spoia) collected from 1906 earthquake damage at Stanford University. The tile roof was made by Portuguese craftsmen who rolled and formed the clay across their thighs, while a local foundry crafted the decorative wrought iron on the windows and staircase. (If you are walking, you will notice, too, the wall tiles that exhibit original Aztec designs de Lemos recorded on a trip to Mexico.)



Before we leave the courtyard, I should also mention that the de Lemos buildings were truly a family collaboration. Wife, Reta, created all of the tiles, Pedro's brother carved the wooden ornamentation, and his father built the stone steps and the well in the manner he was taught as a young man in Portugal.

***Walk southeast down Ramona to examine a series of small shops:***

526-542 RAMONA STREET



This little group of storefronts was another project of the Palo Alto Improvement Co. to further establish Ramona Street as a shopping destination and to unify its visual character.

The buildings were designed by Birge Clark in the Spanish Colonial style to complement the de Lemos buildings. Once again, in the building on the left you will note a larger structure employing varying roof heights and multiple facades to appear to be two separate buildings. (It is actually divided into multiple shops internally.) The balconies above echo the de Lemos balcony across the street, and the general exterior of both continue the guise of a Spanish village in their facade.

These are good, though not spectacular design. It's the Craftsman details that bring the interest. Be sure to notice the hand-adzed beams, the rough, lumpy stucco applied to appear to be adobe, and the irregular concrete pavers in front of the shops. Step back to the curb and observe how the Spanish theme flows through the whole street.



***Continue southwest down the street pausing before the Ramona entry of the Cardinal Hotel.***

CARDINAL HOTEL INTERIOR

Be sure to notice the bas-relief panels on the entry columns. They are fun and celebrate the newly arrived era of the automobile.



***Please enter the hotel.***

Architect William Weeks designed an enormous number of California buildings. You may have even attended one of his schools, as he designed over 1200 of them in California. Palo Alto High School itself was based on a William Weeks' school design. Normally, Weeks' public buildings were quite straightforward, but surprisingly, his residential designs tended to be very ornate. This hotel, therefore, is a hybrid, a kind of "public" residence. You'll find it's more elaborate, even glamorous, on the interior while relatively simple on the exterior.



From the moment you walk through the door, you feel the transition from simplicity to the ornate - particularly in the lobby, which is serving the function of a living room. You see that the lobby is richly textured with its glazed-tile floors and large wrought iron lighting fixtures. There's also the boxed-beam ceiling, a fireplace with a massive mantle, and finally, fabulous spiral-trimmed columns.

The skylight shaft enabled the Cardinal Hotel to boast that every room had natural light, something quite unusual for the 1920's. In the early years, the capitals on the twisting columns were gilded and the walls were painted in a brushed gold, so the original room literally glowed under the large skylight.

Below the tiled floor, there is a storage basement that was once a subterranean club used for dinner dances. It featured a hardwood spring-floor, perfect for dancing, and during Prohibition this became a speakeasy.

## CONCLUSION

On your walk through Ramona Street, you discovered a great deal of coherence in its historic architecture (quite a unique characteristic for a California city), with a consistent presentation of the style and detail of Spanish Colonial Revival being demonstrated. Hopefully, you have gained a new appreciation for the special visual and architectural resources of Palo Alto and perhaps have a new zeal for preservation. I hope you enjoyed your walk and will join us for future excursions when our historic tours resume on Club Days.