SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS

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NCCSAH Offering Early Summer Tour of Oakland's Mills College Campus

The NCCSAH has organized a fascinating tour June 10, 2026 of Mills College in Oakland. Tour leaders will include Karen Fiene, AIA, the Mills College Campus Architect from 2006-2022 and coauthor of Celebrating the Cultural Landscape of Mills College (2008) with Robert Sabbatini, who will speak on the history of the campus and its landscape. Woody Minor, author of *The Architecture of Ratcliff* (Heyday Books, 2006), will contribute to the afternoon tour focusing on the buildings of Walter Ratcliff Jr. The tour will also include commentary on some of the more modern buildings and the landscaping as we walk around this lovely campus.

Mills College, 1920. Photograph: Northeastern University (Oakland)

The second women's college in the Western United States, Mills College was founded in 1852 and moved to Oakland in 1871, when Mills Hall was built, designed by S. C. Bugbee and Son (who designed the Crocker and Stanford mansions on Nob Hill). Mills College's rich 20th century architectural history includes significant buildings by architects Julia Morgan, Walter Ratcliff Jr. and Warren Callister, among other well-known architects.

The tour will last from 9:30 AM to 4:00 PM on June 10, 2026, and include coffee and refreshments in the morning and a box lunch. It will require approximately 1 1/2 miles of walking on flat terrain. The tour and lunch cost $75 for members and $105 for non-members (includes annual membership dues).

See detailed schedule on page 7 and registration form on page 10.

A Green Oasis in Urban Oakland: A Brief History of the Mills College Campus

A visitor's first impression of Mills College is of a lush garden with buildings set within the landscape. Early 20th-century Spanish Colonial Revival buildings line an allée of overarching London plane trees. As the campus grew to 135 acres, it continued to focus on the relationship between buildings and landscape. Life on campus involved intimate awareness of nature. Today, Mills College is a verdant island in an urban area.

Mills College was an independent women's college from 1871 until 1920, when graduate programs for men and women were added. In June 2022 Mills merged with Northeastern University, a Boston-based multicampus international institution. Mills College is now called the Northeastern University Oakland Campus.

Founders

The First Period of Significance 1868-1916

Mills College was founded by eastern educators Cyrus Mills and Susan Tolman Mills with religious origins, intent upon providing spiritual guidance during the early days of the Gold Rush. After outgrowing its modest beginnings in Benicia, Mills College moved to Oakland and was sited at the confluence of Leona and Chimes Creeks on gently sloping open farmland with views of the bay.

Susan Tolman graduated from Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, Massachusetts, in 1843. Cyrus Mills graduated from Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts with a doctorate in divinity. He was a determined, faith-driven man. Williams College trained young men to teach Christian ethics of civility and morality. Mills requested mission assignments "where no one else dares to go." The couple were assigned first to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and later to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii).

The Mills bought the Young Ladies' Seminary in Benicia in 1865 with the intent of educating and refining the daughters of frontier families. Cyrus,

El Campanil, Mills College. Julia Morgan Architect (1904)
Photo: Phil Bellman

looking to the future success of the school, decided that Oakland was a better location because the transcontinental railroad was to end there in 1868. They bought the first 60 acres in 1871, outside of the city of Oakland near San Leandro, to give the campus the feeling of a remote retreat.

The first principal building would hold all academic, administrative and living space for the students. The Mills hired S.C. Bugbee & Son, designer of Oakland's first city hall and whose clients included Leland Stanford and Charles Crocker. The building was in the Second Empire style, inspired by the French architect François Mansart. Completed in 1871, Mills Hall remains a major presence on the campus even though subsequent master plans called for demolishing it because it did not fit in with

Eadweard Muybridge photograph of Mills College, today's Mills Hall. Architect: S.C. Bugbee & Son, c. 1871. Photo: calisphere.org

proposed Beaux-Arts alignments. It is the only building on campus listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is also a California Historical Landmark.

Cyrus Mills died in 1884 and Susan Tolman Mills became president in 1890, serving in that role for 16 years. One of her early projects was the Greek Revival Lisser Hall, designed by G.W. Percy and Willis Polk in 1901 and serving as a performing arts center, as well as for meetings and receptions. In 1903, embarking on a program of new construction, the board of trustees decided to hire California's first licensed woman architect to design several new structures.

Julia Morgan was the first woman to graduate from the University of California, Berkeley, with a degree in civil engineering. Her mentor, Bernard Maybeck, encouraged her to further her education at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Traveling there in 1896, she was turned away but continued to reapply and retest until she was allowed admission, earning her Certificate of Arts in 1902.

Morgan's first job in the Bay Area was with John Galen Howard, designer of the University of California, Berkeley's original Beaux-Arts ensemble. She worked on the drawings for the Hearst Mining Building and was made assistant supervising architect on the Greek theater, an extensive concrete structure.

In 1903 Morgan started her own firm. El Campanil at Mills College, completed in 1904, may have been one of her first commissions. Funded by Mr. and Mrs. Francis Marion 'Borax' Smith, it was a Mission-style reinforced concrete bell tower. It survived the 1906 earthquake with no damage, giving Morgan almost instant regional credibility and drawing commissions from many prominent clients.

Her next building at Mills was the 1906 Margaret Carnegie Library (now Carnegie Hall), a tribute to Andrew Carnegie's daughter, a mixture of Mediterranean revival and Italian renaissance styles. In what became one of her hallmarks, the second floor reading room has a ceiling of exposed heavy redwood trusses. Both El Campanil and the Margaret Carnegie Library are sited to relate to The Oval, the large open space in front of Mills Hall.

Carnegie Library at Mills College. Julia Morgan, architect. (1906) Photo: carnegie-libraries.org

Kapiolani Cottage, named for the Mills College club of Hawaiian women, is a small Arts and Crafts style wood-shingled building which originally served as the infirmary and later as housing for missionaries and caretakers. It was later modified by enclosing the sleeping porches on top of the building.

Morgan's gymnasium building was constructed in 1910 (demolished) and her last project for the College, Alumnae Hall, in 1916. The latter is a Spanish Colonial Revival structure with fluted neo-classical columns at the entrance and east side.

Bender Room, Carnegie Library. Historic view. Architect: Julia Morgan (1906) Photo: carnegie-libraries.org

Morgan designed one more building which is now part of the campus. Originally called the Ming Quong Home for Chinese girls, built in 1924, it became a Mills dormitory in 1936. It now houses the Julia Morgan School for Girls, a private middle school. Designed to look like a traditional Chinese country house, there are Chinese motifs on the exterior and in the courtyard.

In 1916, Dr. Aurelia Reinhardt became President of Mills College, developing her own design team. By 1919 Morgan was hired by William Randolph Hearst to begin the design of La Cuesta Encantada, Hearst Castle, in San Simeon, and her work for the College ended.

The Modern Campus: The Second Period of Significance 1916-1949

At 39, widowed and the mother of two small boys, Aurelia Henry Reinhardt was not the typical choice for a college president. However, she carried an academic pedigree unusual for a woman at that time, especially in the West. She was the first woman to have a doctorate from Yale University, and the first woman to be granted an honorary degree from the University of California, Berkeley. She was well connected in progressive, academic, and social settings in the Bay Area, a strong, confident woman of extraordinary potential. Among her accomplishments, she was a founder of the East Bay Regional Park District in 1934. In 2019, one of their main East Bay parks was renamed Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park.

Reinhardt was president of Mills College from 1916 to 1943. In 1916, there were eleven buildings on campus; when she retired, twenty-eight new or remodeled buildings attributed to her success. While this was the era of the growing influence of automobiles, she was dedicated to retaining and enhancing the pastoral visual components of the campus. At the urging of Bernard Maybeck, who had created a master plan for the campus, 15 acres were added to the west end of campus. His master plan was not fully realized at least partly because it required the demolition of the original core buildings. At the same time, by 1919, his major supporter on the Mills College Board of Directors, Phoebe Apperson Hearst, had died.

The years between 1916 and 1943 mark a period of growth and expansion at Mills College in which the work of the college attained significance of a national and international character.

Music Building, Mills College. Walter Ratcliff architect. (1928). Photo: ruthchek.com

Walter Ratcliff, Jr.

Reinhardt took a more moderate approach than proposed in Maybeck's masterplan, adding to the existing campus rather than tearing buildings down that didn't fit in. Her search for another master planner brought her to Walter Ratcliff, Jr., an ambitious, self-taught man who had apprenticed under John Galen Howard. Ratcliff's son has said that a visit to the Spanish Colonial Revival Oak Knoll Country Club in the Oakland hills by Reinhardt and Ratcliff established the style of the campus and started Ratcliff's research into that

style. A major design influence during that period was the San Diego Exposition of 1915, where Bertram Goodhue's Balboa Park became the inspiration for the Spanish Colonial Revival style. Ratcliff also traveled in Mexico in order to better understand the style.

During Ratcliff's tenure as campus architect, he designed or remodeled twelve buildings. He designed a new gate for a new west entrance, now the main entrance to campus as well as the Seminary entrance, called Wetmore Gate and Lodge. His major remodeling of Lisser Hall reversed the interior functions and designed a new entry to fit in with the new architectural style. In 1925, his design for the Art Gallery Building was never fully completed, as it is missing its proposed beautiful tower. However, an enormous skylight fills the interior with natural light.

Mills College Chapel. Charles Warren Callister architect (1967). Photo: Ward Hill

Ratcliff's most important and impressive complex is the Music Building and Greek Theater of 1928. Located along the main entry drive to campus, it helps set the overall feeling of the campus with its beautifully detailed Spanish Colonial entry and colonnade. With Andalusian-inspired walled courtyards with Moorish tile fountains, this is his most ornate interpretation of the Spanish Colonial revival style. The Greek Theater is built into the hill behind the building and the hill itself is covered with an oak woodland.

The first residence hall designed by Ratcliff was the Ethel Moore student housing, a rambling, faux-Spanish village on Prospect Hill with sixteen elevation changes and five patios, set into a south-facing hillside. From 1928 to 1940 he designed a group of nine single-family and duplex homes known as Faculty Village. The Norman Bridge Health Center (now the Vera Long Building) was completed in 1930. Ratcliff's last project at Mills, in 1935, was another dormitory on Prospect Hill, Mary Morse Hall.

After 1949

Since 1949, Mills College has continued to choose well-known architects with a strong interest in environmentally friendly design. These include Warren Callister, who designed a small gem called The Chapel, in 1967, which will be the final stop on our tour. In the early 1970's Skidmore Owings & Merrill designed a cluster of residence halls around a lovely dining hall called Founders Commons, and Ernest Kump's designed Haas Pavilion. Olin Library was added in 1990, designed by Esherick Homsey Dodge and Davis (EHDD), who also designed the Moore Natural Sciences Building in 2007. The most recent building is the Lokey Graduate School of Business completed in 2010 by Bohlin Cywinski Jackson. The last two buildings were LEED-certified by the US Green Building Council.

—Betsy Yost, AIA
Member, NCCSAH Board

Littlefield Concert Hall at Mills College mural. Artist: Raymond Boynton. Architect: Walter H. Ratcliff, Jr. 2009 renovation: EHDD Architecture. Photo: Ward Hill

Above: Music Building entrance at Mills College, (2008) Photo: Ward Hill

Milestones in Mills College History

Mills Photos

1852
Mills College is founded as the Young Ladies' Seminary in Benicia, California.

1865
Missionaries Susan and Cyrus Mills (*pictured above*) buy the seminary and rename it Mills College.

1871
The seminary is moved to the Oakland foothills, where a new campus has been purchased and Mills Hall is built.

1885
Mills is chartered as the first women's college west of the Rockies.

1920
The Graduate Division opens, offering programs to both women and men.

1926
Mills launches the first laboratory school west of the Mississippi for aspiring teachers.

1974
Mills becomes the first women's college to offer a computer science major.

1990
The trustees reaffirm their commitment to educating women following a campus-wide strike to remain all-women at the undergraduate level.

2001
Mills becomes the first women's college to offer a bachelors-to-master's BA/MBA accelerated degree program.

2014
Mills launches the first transgender and nonbinary admissions policy in the country at a women's college.

2022
Mills merges with Northeastern University; the Mills Institute is established. mills.northeastern.edu

Music at Mills College

The Music Department rose to international prominence in the Music Building designed by Walter H. Ratcliff Jr., which opened its doors in 1928. Its beautiful Concert Hall, adorned by striking frescoes created by Berkeley artist Ray Boynton, featured performances of new music in the 1930s and 1940s, initiating a contemporary music performance tradition that continued in subsequent years.

French composer Darius Milhaud arrived at Mills in 1940, adding to the Music Department's international reputation. Milhaud attracted musical luminaries to Mills—such as Bela Bartók, Nadia Boulanger, and Igor Stravinsky—as well as generations of talented students including a young pianist and composer named Dave Brubeck (seated above, on Milhaud's right).

During the same period, composers Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison, and John Cage taught at Mills. Together they forged an inclusive aesthetic attitude rooted in an openness to and an active search for new sounds and musical forms, a unique, characteristically "American," musical identity recognized today as the experimentalist tradition.

performingarts.oakland.northeastern.edu

Schedule for Mills College Campus Tour June 10, 2026

Photo: Sanfranman59. commons.wikimedia.org

9:30 - 10:00 AM The tour meets at the Bender Room on the 2nd Floor of Carnegie Hall on the Mills College campus. Coffee and refreshments will be available.

10:00 - 10:45 AM Slide show overview of Mills College history. We have three speakers: Luan Stauss, Facilities Operations Manager, on the current state of the campus; Karen Fiene, formerly Campus Architect of Mills College; and Robert Sabbatini, landscape architecture and planning, co-author of *Celebrating the Cultural Landscape Heritage of Mills College* with Karen.

10:45 AM - 12:30 PM Morning Tour, led by Karen Fiene, Bill Kostura and Phil Bellman, including the following buildings: Carnegie Hall, Mills Hall, El Campanil, Lisser Hall and Alumnae Hall

12:30 - 1:30 PM Box lunch, seating in the Tea Shop and nearby courtyard

1:30 - 4:00 PM Afternoon Tour, led by Woody Minor and Karen Fiene, including the following buildings: Art Museum, Warren Olney and Orchard Meadow Halls, President's House, Music Building and the Chapel.

Additional information about where to park, bus stops, etc. will be sent out prior to the tour.

NCCSAH Drinks to the Napa Valley in Fall 2025 Program

We extend our deepest gratitude and appreciation to Napa County Landmarks Executive Director Christine French and architectural historian Kara Brunzell for their invaluable help in organizing our fascinating two-day Napa tour in October. Everyone thought it was a fun and memorable adventure.

We also wish to thank the following people who made our Napa experience so memorable.

Napa County Landmarks hosted our opening reception, October 21, at their Downtown Napa Headquarters. Christine French and Kara Brunzell presented a fascinating overview of Napa history, and we were honored to have Napa Mayor Scott Sedgley speak about preservation and new development in Napa. Christine and Kara led our wonderful morning tour of Napa's downtown and the Abajo neighborhood.

Thanks are due also to owner Brian Jenson for leading our group through the beautiful Churchill Manor mansion and the owners of Cedar Gables (the 1892 Churchill House) for the tour of this significant house designed by Ernest Coxhead.

We want to thank Napa Catering Company for preparing our wonderful lunch in Fuller Park in the Napa Abajo neighborhood. Everyone had a great time socializing with friends in this lovely setting. After lunch Ward Hill and facilities manager Brandon Rubin led a tour of the majestic Greystone Cellars (now the Culinary Institute of America Greystone.

We are grateful also to the following who contributed to our great afternoon tour of Downtown Napa; Erica Simpson, General Manager, for our tour of the stunning Uptown Theater; Julie Worthington, facilities manager, for our tour of the First Presbyterian Church of Napa; Heidi Van de Ryt, Court Executive Assistant, for arranging our tour of the 1875 Napa County Courthouse which included hearing about the history of the Napa courts with Superior Court Judge Joseph J. Solga in his courtroom.

Our deep appreciation also to Beringer Vineyard guides Jose Zepeda and Nicole Fagerhaug, who, on the following day, led an excellent, in-depth tour of the Beringer wine caves and the impressive 1884 Rhine House (with its sublime stained-glass windows). One of the earliest wineries in Napa Valley, Beringer is celebrating its 150th Anniversary this year.

Also, many thanks to Maria Nuno, General Manager, who organized our delicious lunch at the Tra Vigne restaurant in St. Helena. After lunch, private tour coordinator, Brian Dunn, led our memorable tour of Hall Wines, a lovely contemporary winery design with an impressive collection of modern art.

All-in-all, it was a memorable two-day experience.

Top: Stained glass at Beringer Rhine House. Photo: Jane Shabaker Above: Hall Wines, St. Helena. Photo: Courtesy of Hall Wine

The Most Happy Fellas (and Gals) Tour
Historic Wine Country

From top left: NCCSAH tour group on the steps of Napa County Courthouse. Photo: Court employee, Heidi Van de Ryl. Bill Kostura snaps a shot at Napa's First Presbyterian Church. Manager Erica Simpson at Napa's Uptown Theater, Guide Nicole Fagerhaug at Beringer Rhine House. Stained glass detail at Rhine House.

Photos: Ward Hill

Registration: Mills College Tour

[please print]

Name _____

Affiliation _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Email address _____

Telephone number _____

Number of places on the tour and lunch:

_____ Members @ $75 $_____

_____ Non-members @ $105 $____

Price for non-members includes one-year NCCSAH membership

Total enclosed: $ _____

Please make checks payable to NCCSAH and mail to:

Ward Hill—Mills College Tour
3124 Octavia Street, #102
San Francisco, CA 94123

Membership Dues

Is your membership current?
At $30 per year,
NCCSAH membership is still a great deal.
Please see the coupon on the last page for details.

Events Calendar

San Mateo County Historical Association
Exhibit (on-going): *Peninsula Innovators Changing the World.* Redwood City. historysmc.org

2026 AIASF Design Awards Gala
Thursday, May 7, 2026. The Chinese Culture Center, 750 Kearny St., 3rd Floor, San Francisco. aiasf.org

California Preservation Foundation
May 6 - 9, 2026. Annual CPF Conference, *Past Meets Possible: Reimagining Place and Purpose* Riverside Convention Center.

May 28 - June 04, 2026, 10:00 am - 1:00 pm. *Local Government Bootcamp: Rethinking Community Engagement in Preservation.* californiapreservation.org

Society for Industrial Archeology
54th Annual Conference, May 28 - June 1, 2026. Highlights maritime-industrial landscape of Norfolk, Virginia. sia-web.org

California Preservation Foundation
Online event—*Local Government Bootcamp: Rethinking Community Engagement in Preservation*. May 28 - June 4, 2026, 10:00 AM - 1:00 PM. (415) 495-0349.

Berkeley Historical Society
Walking Tour, Saturday June 6, 2026: The North Berkeley Rock Parks. Reservations required. berkhistory.org

Filoli
“Summer Nights”, June 11 - September 17, 2026. Wednesdays and Thursdays 5:00-8:00 pm. filoli.org

National Trust for Historic Preservation
National Preservation Summit. September 22 - 24, 2026, Washington, DC. www.savingplaces.org

SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS

The mission of the NCCSAH is to promote the study and discussion of our region's architectural history and its related fields; visit significant works of architecture; and increase public awareness and appreciation of our historic built environment. Membership is open to anyone interested in architectural history and its related fields.

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Ward Hill
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