



**THE BUILDING  
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**770 OAK KNOLL CIRCLE**

**PASADENA**

**Style:** Italian Revival

**Year Completed:** 1922

**Architect:** Marston & Van Pelt, one of Pasadena's most renowned and artistic design firms. Please see the attached information.

**Builder:** John H. Simpson, Pasadena, a significant builder. Additional information is attached.

**First Owners:** Oliver Howard Cunningham and his wife Nora Gibson Cunningham. Mr. Cunningham was born on July 18, 1866 in Madison, Indiana where he received his education. He made his fortune in the manufacturing of barrel staves and had retired around 1910 when he was only 44 years of age. Before settling permanently in Pasadena, Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham were regular winter visitors to Pasadena and also stayed at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. They were described as "popular members of the local hotel colony" with a wide circle of friends. Mr. Cunningham died suddenly on March 31, 1935 at the age of 68. His body was taken back to Madison for burial. A copy of his obituary is attached. Mrs. Cunningham (1869-1951) was also a native of Indiana. She continued to live in the family home for the next ten years or more.

**Original Building Permit:** #9069B, issued by the City of Pasadena on August 12, 1922 for a two-story, eleven-room residence. The house was to measure approximately 60 by 63 feet with a height of 28 feet. It was to have a concrete foundation, walls of wood and plaster, a tile roof, one chimney, and double-thick wood floors. Original light fixtures were from B. B. Bell & Company and from the Wilkinson-Scott Company.

A copy of this permit is attached.

**Cost to Build:** \$27,000—a great deal of money in 1922 when the average house could be built for about one-quarter of that amount.

**Other Building Permits Found in Historical Files:** A deck on the south side of the house was repaired in September 1936. The house was first re-roofed in September 1939. Later that year, in November, the furnace was replaced with a new 60,000-BTU model.

The entire second-story ceiling area was insulated with rock wool in June 1947. A permit was issued in February 1950 for a hollow-tile “fence” to cost \$180. Five feet tall, it was to run 160 linear feet.

The kitchen was remodeled in February 1955 at a cost of \$1,500. Kenneth A. Gordon, Jr., was the contractor. The work included new cabinets, built-in appliances (including a disposal and a dishwasher), and a window and other miscellaneous alterations.

A permit for a swimming pool was issued in May 1962. To measure approximately 20 by 40 feet with a 31,500-gallon capacity, it was designed and built by R. B. Perry & Associates of Arcadia. The cost was \$3,500. Special permission was required by the City to build the pool within thirty feet of the Fairfield Circle property line. In June 1962, a pool enclosure was built, consisting of 187 linear feet of 6-foot chain-link fencing at the property-line. The cost was \$280. A water heater was replaced in October 1962.

A bathroom was added and an existing bathroom was remodeled in March 1964. A total of 140 square feet was to be added to the rear second-story of the house by this \$8,000 project. I. G. Holguin of Los Angeles was the builder.

The southwest wing of the house was re-roofed in August 1975 and the entire house was re-roofed in December 1984. A new air-conditioning system was installed in July 1985. In June 1987, the kitchen was remodeled again at a cost of \$25,000. A bay window was to be added and a wall removed and replaced. Eastside Construction Company of Bell Gardens was the builder.

Copies of some of these permits are attached.

**Assessor's Records:** The Pasadena City Assessor first visited the property on May 11, 1923 and recorded a newly completed single residence and garage. The house had a concrete foundation, plaster walls, and a hipped tiled roof. Heat was provided by a fireplace and a four-unit gas furnace. There were fifteen plumbing fixtures. Electrical fixtures were rated of “good” quality. Interior finishes were characterized as a mixture of plain, stock, and special. Bookcases were built-in. Over-all construction quality was rated “good”—the highest category available.

The Assessor estimated the square footage at 4,238. The first floor had two living rooms (one was probably a dining room), two bedrooms, one bathroom, a kitchen, and a pantry. On the second floor were four bedrooms and two fully tiled bathrooms. There were seven hardwood

floors in the house. There was also a basement that measured ten-feet-square and was five feet deep. The garage, measuring approximately 20 by 33 feet, had a concrete floor, plaster walls, a tile roof, and four plumbing fixtures.

The Assessor returned on April 14, 1948 to record the completion of the insulation job and on September 26, 1950 to note the concrete-block wall job.

On September 5, 1962, the Assessor recorded the construction of the swimming pool and enclosure fence. The pool was surrounded by concrete decking.

The completion of the bathroom alterations and additions was noted by the Assessor on October 26, 1964.

Copies of the Assessor's records are attached.

(Note: The Pasadena City Assessor's office ceased operations in 1974. Their square footage totals often exceeded those of the Los Angeles County Assessor's Office, since they frequently included garages, terraces, patios, etc. in their computation. It is advisable to use the County's square footage figures since they are more up-to-date and consistent.)

**Other Owners and Residents:** By 1947, Mrs. Cunningham had sold her home to Paul and Margaret Buhling. Mr. Buhling worked as an advisor with the Investment Operating Corporation located at 90 South Oak Knoll Avenue in Pasadena.

Thomas R. and Gretchen W. Rau had become the owners by 1949. Mr. Rau was vice-president of Pacific Finance in Los Angeles.

By 1955, Earl R. and Anne C. Lingle had purchased the property. Mr. Lingle was associated with the Lingle Brothers Coffee Company of Los Angeles.

Raymond Fahn and his wife Jane M. Fahn became the owners around 1961. Mr. Fahn was president, and later chairman of the board, of California Girl, Inc., in Los Angeles.

Fred W. and Judith B. Brandt have been the owners since November 1975.

**Note:** On August 12, 1922, the *Pasadena Star-News* announced that thirty new residences had recently been started in the city. It added that "one of the largest permits expected...is for a beautiful home to be erected for O. H. Cunningham." A copy of this article is attached.

**Significance:** The Cunningham house is eligible for inclusion on the California Inventory of Historical Resources due to its fine design by locally significant architects, its good state of preservation, and its contribution to the Oak Knoll neighborhood which is itself potentially eligible for listing as a district on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Sources:**

Los Angeles Public Library  
City of Pasadena, Planning Dept., Design & Historic Preservation Section (Archives)  
Pasadena Public Library (Centennial Room)  
Pasadena Historical Museum (Library & Archives)

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November 16, 1946; December 10, 1952; November 2 and 4, 1972

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# MARSTON & VAN PELT

## Architects

Born in Oakland in 1883, Sylvanus Marston moved with his family later that year to Pasadena, where his father had purchased a tract of citrus groves in the area near present-day California Boulevard and Oakland Avenue.

A fourth-generation architect (his grandfather built lighthouses along the coast and barracks at the Presidio), Marston went east to Cornell University to study architecture after attending Pomona College for two years. He graduated from Cornell in 1907 and returned to Pasadena where he started his own firm in 1908, after training one year with Myron Hunt. In 1910 he married Edith Hatfield, and after honeymooning in then-distant Hawaii, the young couple settled down in a Marston-designed house at 661 South El Molino Avenue, Pasadena.

Marston's early residential designs are firmly in the Craftsman tradition popular at the time. However, the interiors often contained surprises, such as the vaulted ceiling in the Lacey House at 1115 East Woodbury Road, Altadena, and refined brick fireplaces in place of the heavy boulder ones favored in the Craftsman era. His early commercial work and larger residential designs followed the Beaux Arts tradition in which he had been trained. Later, he and his associates worked with an incredible array of styles, including just about every possible type of Period Revival. Examples of the variety of Marston's residential architecture include the Buckingham House at 325 Bellefontaine Street, Pasadena (1918-19), in the Queen Anne style; the Spanish Colonial Garford House at 1126 Hillcrest Avenue, Pasadena (1919); and a French Provincial mansion at 293 South Grand Avenue, Pasadena (1926)

By 1925, Marston's firm had become one of the largest in Southern California, with offices in both Pasadena and Los Angeles. Marston was made a "fellow" of the American Institute of Architects and served twice as its President. He died in 1946. The Pasadena Historical Museum archives has a complete list of Marston's works, including some photographs and drawings.

Garrett Beekman Van Pelt was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1879. He was educated at the Chicago Art Institute's School of Architecture. After graduation in 1912, he traveled extensively in Europe for eighteen months, sketching the local architecture. This early exposure to European designs undoubtedly influenced his later penchant for period revival styles.

Upon moving to Pasadena in 1915, Van Pelt entered into partnership with Sylvanus Marston. In 1921 they took on another partner, Edgar Maybury. Van Pelt was, in the words of another architect, the artist of the firm, bringing a sense of scale and lightness to Marston's predominantly dark and heavy designs. In the 1920s he participated in the firm's commissions for the Pasadena Athletic Club at the northwest corner of Los Robles and Green (now demolished), the Security Bank Building at Colorado and Lake (also now gone), Turner-

Stevens Mortuary at Holly and Marengo, and many others during the time when Marston, Van Pelt and Maybury created the commercial and cultural setting for the new Civic Center.

Van Pelt's own singular contribution was the Peters Building on the northwest corner of Euclid and Green (now also demolished). Several other designs are also attributed to him: the Grace Nicholson Building on Los Robles (now the Pacific Asia Museum), the Hill Avenue and Santa Catalina Branch Libraries, and the Westminster Presbyterian Church. Van Pelt's major residential work during this period included the Peters residence (1926), the Norris residence (1930), the Staats residence (1929), and his own home at 1212 South El Molino (1930). In 1926 Van Pelt published a book entitled *Old Architecture of Southern Mexico*. It is full of photographs that he took during his extensive travels there.

Upon Van Pelt's nomination to the American Institute of Architects, of which he had become a member in 1943 and was made a Fellow in 1964, it was stated that this "was an architect of distinction (who) worked with real understanding of the architecture of the period from which he was drawing his inspiration. He was extremely versatile and equally talented in almost all of the styles."

Another interesting comment on the firm of Marston and Van Pelt, can be found in Around Pasadena by Sills and Manion: "During the 20s no architectural firm had more influence in Pasadena than the firm of Marston and Van Pelt. Although they did not expound upon a new architectural form, they showed amazing ability in their prolific and versatile designs..."

In 1927 Van Pelt left the Marston firm and the following year went into partnership with George Lind. The firm of Van Pelt and Lind was responsible for much of the development of Santa Anita Oaks in Arcadia during the 1930s. They also designed low-cost housing in Palm Springs. Jurgensens Market on California Blvd. in Pasadena was another of their projects (since remodeled into Wild Oats market). The Owsley house (1935) and the Robert Bassett house (1937) are considered two of their most important residential designs. The partnership was dissolved in 1941, whereupon Van Pelt went into business for himself.

After World War II, Van Pelt returned to Mexico and bought a house in San Miguel de Allende. However, he soon returned to the United States, settling in Montecito where he had built a house. He executed his last large commission there--the Armour house, designed for the heir of the Armour Packing Co. Van Pelt officially retired in 1970 and died in November 1972 at the age of 93.

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## JOHN H. SIMPSON

John H. Simpson, one of Pasadena's most prolific contractors, was born in Camden, New Jersey on February 14, 1885. After taking a business college course in Philadelphia, he relocated to Los Angeles in 1905 where he pursued architecture for a while. Upon moving to Pasadena in 1906, Simpson began a building career that would last over 47 years.

Simpson was active in civic affairs, having been a charter member of the Pasadena Kiwanis Club, a director of the Union National Bank, a member and past president of the Overland Club, the Hi-Twelve Club, and an active Mason and member of Scottish Rite. He was one of Pasadena's youngest City Directors when he was elected to the Board (now the City Council). Simpson was also a committed Republican, having served as a member of the party's finance committee.

At the time of his passing on December 9, 1952 at the age of 67, Simpson was credited with being the oldest building contractor in Pasadena in length of activity. His building projects ranged from costly homes in Pasadena and Beverly Hills to large commercial and military installations.