



CITY OF GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA REPORT TO THE CITY COUNCIL

AGENDA ITEM

Report: 926 Hillcroft Road: Consideration of Glendale Register Nomination and Request for a Mills Act Historic Property Contract.

1. Resolution to designate the residential property at 926 Hillcroft Road as a historic resource in the Glendale Register of Historic Resources, as the W.R. Burnett House, and authorize the City Manager to enter into a Mills Act Historical Property Contract with the property owner.
2. Motion to deny the request of the property owner to designate the residential property at 926 Hillcroft Road as a historic resource in the Glendale Register of Historic Resources.

COUNCIL ACTION

Item Type: Public Hearing

Approved for October 24, 2023 **calendar**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The owner of 926 Hillcroft Road requests that the City Council designate/list the property in the Glendale Register of Historic Resources and authorize a Mills Act historical property contract. The Spanish Colonial Revival house was built in 1929 and was the home of novelist and screenwriter W.R. Burnett and his wife Marjorie from 1931 to at least 1946. Mr. Burnett made significant contributions to both popular literature and film, particularly in relation to crime fiction and gangster films. While living in the Hillcroft house, he wrote some of his most successful novels and film scripts including *Scarface*, *High Sierra*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, and *This Gun for Hire*.

On June 15, 2023, the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) reviewed the nomination and voted 4-1, with Commissioner Doom dissenting, to recommend to the City Council that the property at 926 Hillcroft Road be listed in the Glendale Register of Historic Resources as the "W.R. Burnett House," and that the City Manager be authorized to enter into a Mills Act historic property contract with the property owner, including the work conditions approved by the commission, under Section 15.20.070A of the Glendale Municipal Code.

COUNCIL PRIORITIES

Not applicable.

RECOMMENDATION

That City Council authorize listing of the property in the Glendale Register of Historic Resources and authorize the City Manager to enter into a Mills Act historic property contract, with the conditions approved by HPC, between the City and the property owner under Section 15.20.070A of the Glendale Municipal Code.

BACKGROUND

Historical Background

926 Hillcroft Road is a two story, single-family residence constructed in 1929 in the Spanish Colonial Revival-style. The original building permit lists Arlos R. Sedgley as the architect, and Walter A. Graham as the builder. Sedgley was an active local architect in Southern California in the 1920s-1950s and was an AIA member from 1946-1961. His designs employed a variety of building types and styles, with simplicity being at the forefront of his work. Examples in Los Angeles include the French Chateau Apartments in Koreatown (Historic Cultural Monument 815), the Pozzo Residence at 2358 N. Vermont Avenue, and the B’Nai Israel Synagogue at 2448 Houston Street. Sedgely moved to Japan in 1955 where he lived until he passed in 1967. Graham was a local contractor/builder about whom little is known. The first owner of the property was Annie Romanowski but no information was found about her.

In 1931, W. R. Burnett and his wife Marjorie moved to Glendale from Chicago and purchased the property, where they lived until at least 1946 according to city directories. Mr. Burnett had been writing shorts stories and novels since the early 1900’s without great success. This changed in 1929 with the publication of *Little Caesar*, which was a best-seller and is credited by some as the first modern gangster novel. Warner Bros. Pictures’ purchased the screen rights shortly after publication, which facilitated the Burnetts’ move west. The studio commissioned him to write the screenplay for the 1931 film version, which made Edward G. Robinson a star and was listed in the National Film Registry in 2000. New York movie theaters played it 24 hours day and police were often called to keep order of the crowds. Scholars cite Burnett’s portrayal of the main character Caesar “Rico” Bandello as the creation of a new archetype, the likeable anti-hero, by writing about the American gangster through their point of view. The technique humanized criminals in a way that hadn’t been done before. This change of pace set the standard for gangster novels, and later mysteries and rebel novels, for decades to come.

A lot of Burnett’s success in novels is attributed to his gift for strong dialogue, which translated naturally to screen writing, and his immersive research practices.

Burnett would go on to have a career spanning five decades with 60 screen credits and 34 published novels. Many among these have had a lasting impact, including the novels *High Sierra* (book and film script, 1941) and *The Asphalt Jungle* (book, 1949; script 1950). Some of his other well-known scripts include *Scarface* (1932), *This Gun for Hire* (1942) and *The Great Escape* (1963). Burnett was nominated for an Academy Award for the screenplay for *Wake Island* (1942), along with co-writer Frank Butler. In 1980, he received the Grand Master Award, the highest honor of the Mystery Writers of America. W.R. Burnett died in Santa Monica in 1982.

During the years Mr. Burnett lived at 926 Hillcroft Road, he authored some of his most significant novels and screen plays including: *Little Caesar*, *Scarface*, *High Sierra*, and *This Gun for Hire*, with a total of approximately eighteen novels and screen plays written while he was in residence.

After William and Marjorie divorced in the mid-1940's, the house turned over ownership several times and, aside from Mr. Burnett, no other owners or residents appear significant in the history of the nation, state, region, or city. The current owners purchased the property in 2021. Additionally, no information provided in the application or through staff research suggests that the property is identified with important events in national, state, or city history, or that it exemplifies significant contributions to the broad cultural, political, economic, social, tribal, or historic heritage of the nation, state, or city. It therefore does not appear eligible under Criterion 1. The property is also not an exemplary or distinctive example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style and has been somewhat altered over the years and therefore does not appear eligible under Criterion 3.

Based on the information in the nomination, attached to this report as Exhibit 1 and incorporated by reference, staff believes the property is eligible for listing in the Glendale Register under Criterion 2 as detailed in the "Findings of Eligibility" section below. Staff recommends the house be listed as the "W.R. Burnett House" for its association with the significant author.

Architectural Description

The two-story residence is located on an irregularly shaped lot on the south side of Hillcroft Road, a short, curvilinear street that spans between Rossmoyne Avenue to the east and Cordova Avenue to the west. The upper level of the house appears to be one-story from the street, with the lower level below following the downslope of the lot to create a two-story rear facade. The building has a "U"-shaped footprint, is clad in textured and smooth stucco (some non-original) and has a low-pitched hipped and gabled roof clad in red clay tiles. The windows include multi-light casement, hung, and fixed, with many of the windows being compatible replacements.

The building is set close to Hillcroft Road with a low brick planter and wrought iron fence running along the front property line. On the primary façade, a projecting wing to the east and the projecting attached garage to the west create a large, uncovered entry courtyard with built-in benches running along the side walls. At the center of the façade is an entrance arcade parallel to the street with two arches. The central column of the arches was altered with brick cladding presumably when the courtyard and driveway were redone with the current brick and concrete. The floor below the arcade was altered with a small stone tiling potentially at the same time. The entrance door itself is a multi-paneled wood door with central wood grille and is set within a deep canted surround. East of the entrance door is an arched window, mirroring the arcade. The attached garage to the west has a hipped roof and non-original roll up door.

A concrete staircase leads down the east façade to the rear where the additional stories of the building are revealed. There are several wood casement windows with leaded diamond pattern along this facade as well as a second-story wood balcony near the center. The balcony has a wrought iron railing and decorative notched beams below. Below this balcony at the first floor is a side door with nonoriginal metal and concrete entrance steps. The rear (south) façade rises to three stories at the east where there is a basement and two stories to the west. The east side of the building projects to the south and the upper floor of this projection cantilevers slightly with a scalloped design. A two-story patio/balcony addition with curved staircase was added to the west side of the façade. This addition removed an original second-story balcony, replaced a second-story picture window with French doors, and blocked/enclosed some original window openings. The stucco texture on the addition is a smooth stucco, which does not match the textured stucco on the remainder of the house. The façade includes some multi-light casement as well as non-original vinyl slider windows.

The rear yard slopes steeply to the south and is terraced with stone and cinder block retaining walls, and a stone staircase accesses each terrace level at the far west.

Architectural features of 926 Hillcroft Road include:

- Irregular footprint
- Two-story volume, with upper floor reading as a single story as viewed from the street
- Stucco cladding
- Hipped and gabled low-pitched roof clad in red clay tile
- Multi-light wood casement windows
- Leaded diamond pattern casement windows
- Wood panel entrance door with wood grille and deep, canted surround

- Attached garage
- Central entrance court with built in benches
- Entrance arcade

Alterations and Integrity

The residence at 926 Hillcroft Road has seen several alterations over the years. As mentioned, the entry courtyard was altered with brick and concrete and the column between the arches was clad in brick. According to the nomination, there was originally a fountain at the center of the courtyard that was removed, but there is no documentation evidencing this. Small stone tiling was also added to the floor below the arcade. In 1940, the depth of the garage was increased by a foot and the current garage door was added at an unknown date. Many of the original windows were replaced with compatible multi-light wood windows on various facades and a few have been replaced with vinyl sliders on the rear facade. On the east facade, steps to a side door were replaced with metal and concrete steps and the leaded windows were repaired by the current owner. A large two-story balcony/patio addition with a winding staircase was added to the west side of the rear facade, which removed or replaced original features such as a wood picture window, and created an awkward massing by covering and partially covering window openings.

Staff therefore recommends the following Mills Act conditions:

1. Remove the iron fence and tall landscaping at the front yard.
2. Remove brick veneer from column at the entrance arcade. Reclad in stucco to match existing house.
3. Replace inappropriate vinyl windows with multi-light casement windows to match existing windows on the property.
4. Replace the non-original garage door with a wood door of simple design.
5. Remove the non-original stone tiling below the arcade and reclad with concrete.

ANALYSIS

Finding of Eligibility

After reviewing the nomination submitted by the owner and its supporting documentation, as well as visiting the site, Planning Division staff concludes that the property appears to meet Criterion 2 of the eligibility criteria for listing in the Glendale Register of Historic Resources.

Association with Significant Person [Criterion 2]

To meet Criterion 2, a property must be “associated with a person, persons, or groups who significantly contributed to the history of the nation, state, region, or city, and retains historic integrity.”

Between 1931 and 1946, William R. Burnett lived at the property with his wife and in-laws. After many years of limited success, Burnett’s fortunes changed with the 1929 publication of *Little Caesar*, which led to a successful career as a novelist and screenwriter. During the years Burnette lived at 926 Hillcroft Road, he authored some of his most significant novels and screen plays including: *Scarface* (1932, dialogue), *High Sierra* (novel and screen play), and *This Gun for Hire* (1942, screenplay). Approximately 18 novels and screen plays, some of his most important work, were written while he lived at the property.

Though the building’s integrity of materials, design, and workmanship have been compromised, the integrity of location, setting, feeling, and association have not. The modifications to the front façade are less dramatic than those at the rear, and the house is still recognizable as a work of its style and era. The building is still located with the same setting of a single-family neighborhood, and retains its minimal, single-family residential feeling and association. For its association with the significant author William R. Burnett, the integrity of materials, design, and workmanship become less important in telling its story since the aesthetics or architectural design are not what is significant. The property’s central story of Burnett living there while writing his prominent works is told more thoroughly through its association, feeling, and setting and these aspects of integrity are retained. Therefore, the subject property appears to be eligible for listing in the Glendale Register under Criterion 2.

STAKEHOLDERS/OUTREACH

There are no stakeholders other than the property owner.

FISCAL IMPACT

Listing historic properties in the Glendale Register has no fiscal impact. However, future property tax savings to private owners of listed historic properties under Mills Act contracts will slightly reduce City property tax revenues from the general County tax levy received from each Mills Act property.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW (CEQA/NEPA)

The project is exempt from CEQA as a Class 8 “Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment” exemption and a Class 31 “Historical Resource Restoration/Rehabilitation” exemption pursuant to Sections 15308 and 15331 of the

State CEQA Guidelines because it involves the designation and protection/preservation of a historic resource.

CAMPAIGN DISCLOSURE

The names and business addresses of the members of the board of directors, the chairperson, CEO, COO, CFO, Subcontractors and any person or entity with more than 10% interest in the company proposed for contract in this Agenda Item Report are attached in Exhibit 4, in accordance with the City Campaign Finance Ordinance No. 5744.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1: Designate 926 Hillcroft Road as a historic resource in the Glendale Register of Historic Resources, finding that the property meets designation Criterion 3, and authorize the City Manager to enter into a Mills Act contract, with conditions, between the City and the property owner.

Alternative 2: Reject designation/listing of 926 Hillcroft Road on the Glendale Register of Historic Resources, finding that the property does not meet Criterion 3 or any other criteria.

Alternative 3: Any other alternative not proposed by staff.

ADMINISTRATIVE ACTION

Prepared by:

Kasey Conley, Planner

Reviewed by:

Jay Platt, Principal Planner

Approved by:

Roubik R. Golanian, P.E., City Manager

EXHIBITS/ATTACHMENTS

Exhibit 1: Glendale Register Nomination

Exhibit 2: Photographs

Exhibit 3: Mills Act Application

Exhibit 4: Campaign Disclosure