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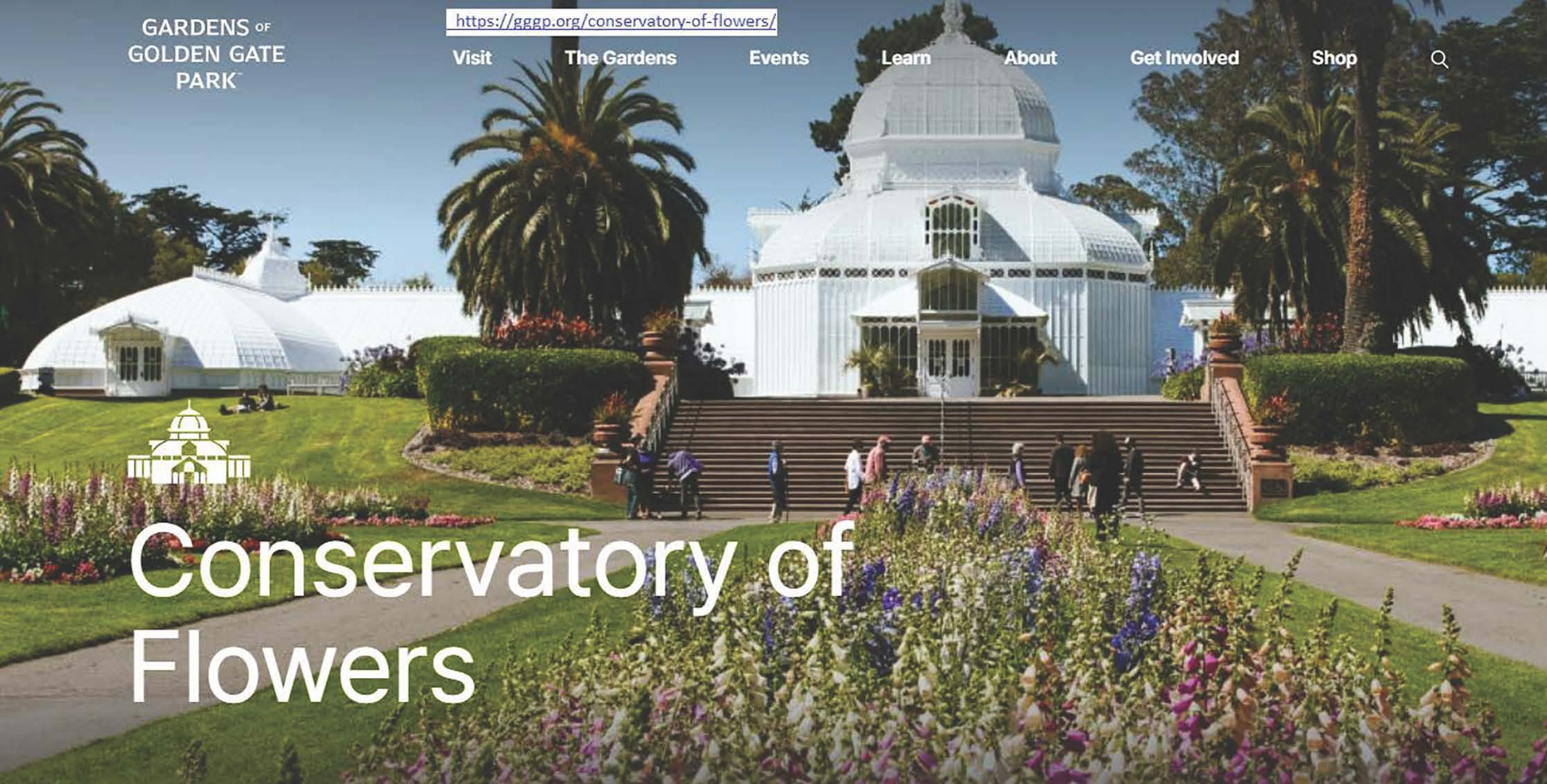
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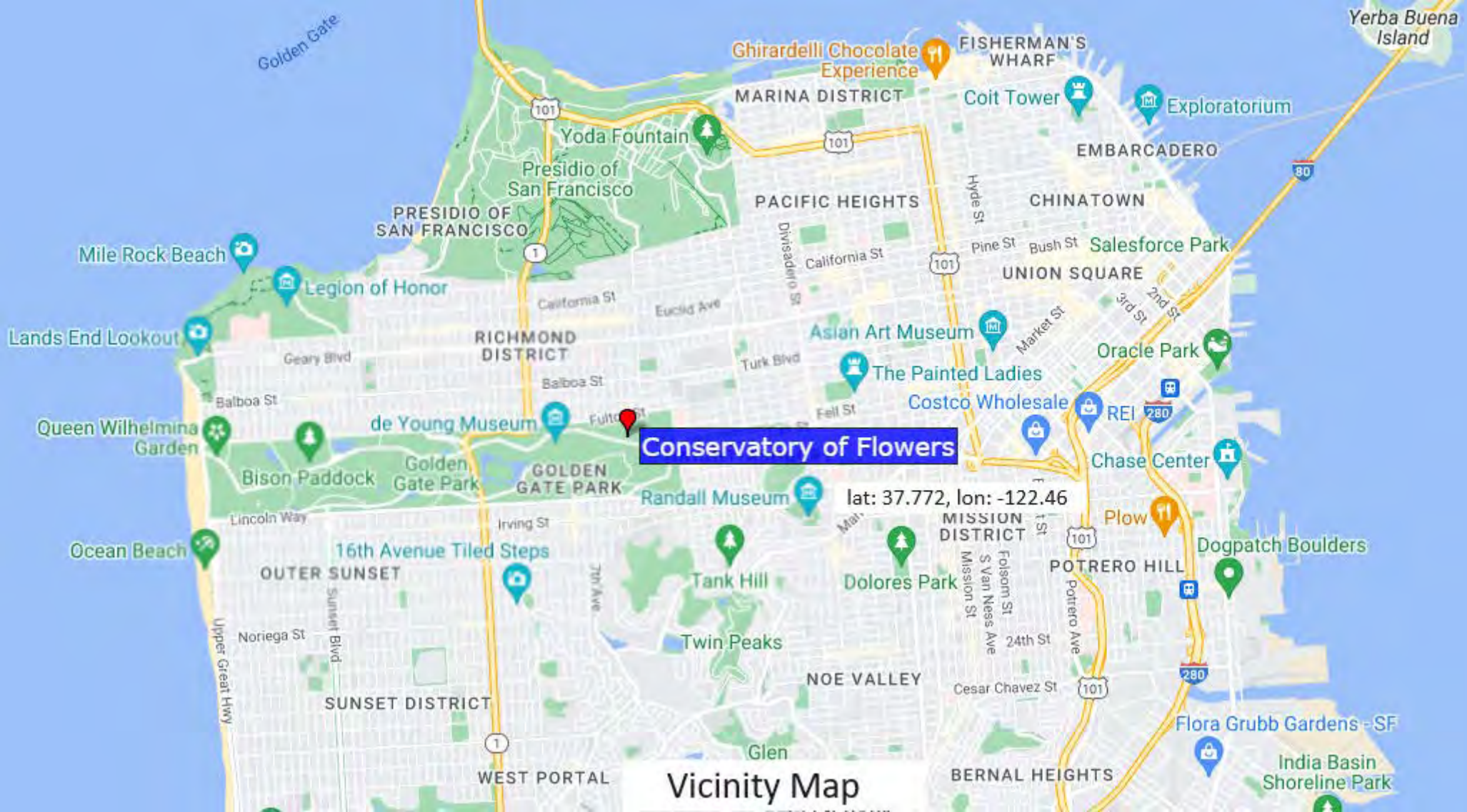
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# Conservatory of Flowers





# Conservatory of Flowers (1879)

Dedicated as a California Historic Civil Engineering Landmark by the San Francisco Section, ASCE



**T**he English have always loved flowers and gardening, and during Victoria's reign, a unique type of greenhouse was designed to permit year-round enjoyment of blooming plants. These glass, iron and wood conservatories were the idea of Sir Joseph Paxton who built, in 1840, the first of this type on the estate of the Duke of Devonshire. Paxton later designed the gigantic Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition of 1851. This vast structure, enclosing 21 acres, was considered the pinnacle of Victorian conservatory design and was used variously as meeting hall and museum until its destruction by fire in 1936.

As would be expected, the glass conservatory was but one of the many aspects of Victorian life adopted by wealthy Americans after the Civil War. James Lick,

the noted San Francisco philanthropist, purchased a conservatory for his homestead in San Jose. Fabricated in London, then disassembled and shipped around Cape Horn to San Francisco, the conservatory remained in crates on the grounds of Lick's estate at the time of his death in 1876.

The Society of California Pioneers fell heir to the structure and subsequently sold it for \$2,600 to a group of public-spirited citizens who, in turn, offered it to the newly formed Golden Gate Park. The conditions of the offer stipulated that the building was to be assembled within 18 months and maintained thereafter for the use and benefit of the public.

The Board of Park Commissioners acknowledged the offer and assured donors that, if sufficient funds

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were provided, the conservatory would be erected. However, a considerable sum of money was needed and all expenditures by the park, at that time, required approval by the State Legislature. An act appropriating \$40,000 for the improvement of Golden Gate Park, including the erection of the Lick Conservatory, was passed in 1878. In May of that year, the London firm of Lord and Burnham was engaged by the park commissioners to put up the building at a cost of \$2,050. F.A. Lord, head of the firm, came to San Francisco to supervise construction.

Strangely, no metal parts had been provided, so Lord was authorized to purchase additional materials. Part of the iron structure, shipped from England on the steamer *Georgia*, was believed lost when she became shipwrecked, although, subsequently, some of the cargo was recovered. Despite these difficulties, construction of the glass, wood and iron conservatory was a fairly simple task and was completed in 1879.

On January 5, 1883, the structure caught fire and the dome was largely destroyed. Since funds for restoring the conservatory were not available, Charles

Crocker, one of the "Big Four" of Central Pacific Railroad fame, donated \$10,000 for the restoration. Over the years, a number of minor changes have been made to the building, but it retains its original appearance.

Still providing a dazzling display of tropical and foliage plants, the conservatory is the oldest existing building in Golden Gate Park and is probably the most outstanding example of Victorian architecture in the Bay Area. In addition to being a civil engineering landmark, it is California Historical Landmark #841 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

## TECHNICAL DATA

<b>Location</b>	Golden Gate Park, San Francisco
<b>Date</b>	Erected 1879
<b>Architect</b>	F.A. Lord, supervising erection

## SPECIAL NOTES

1. The oldest surviving building in Golden Gate Park.
2. The largest surviving glass conservatory structure of the Victorian era in the United States.

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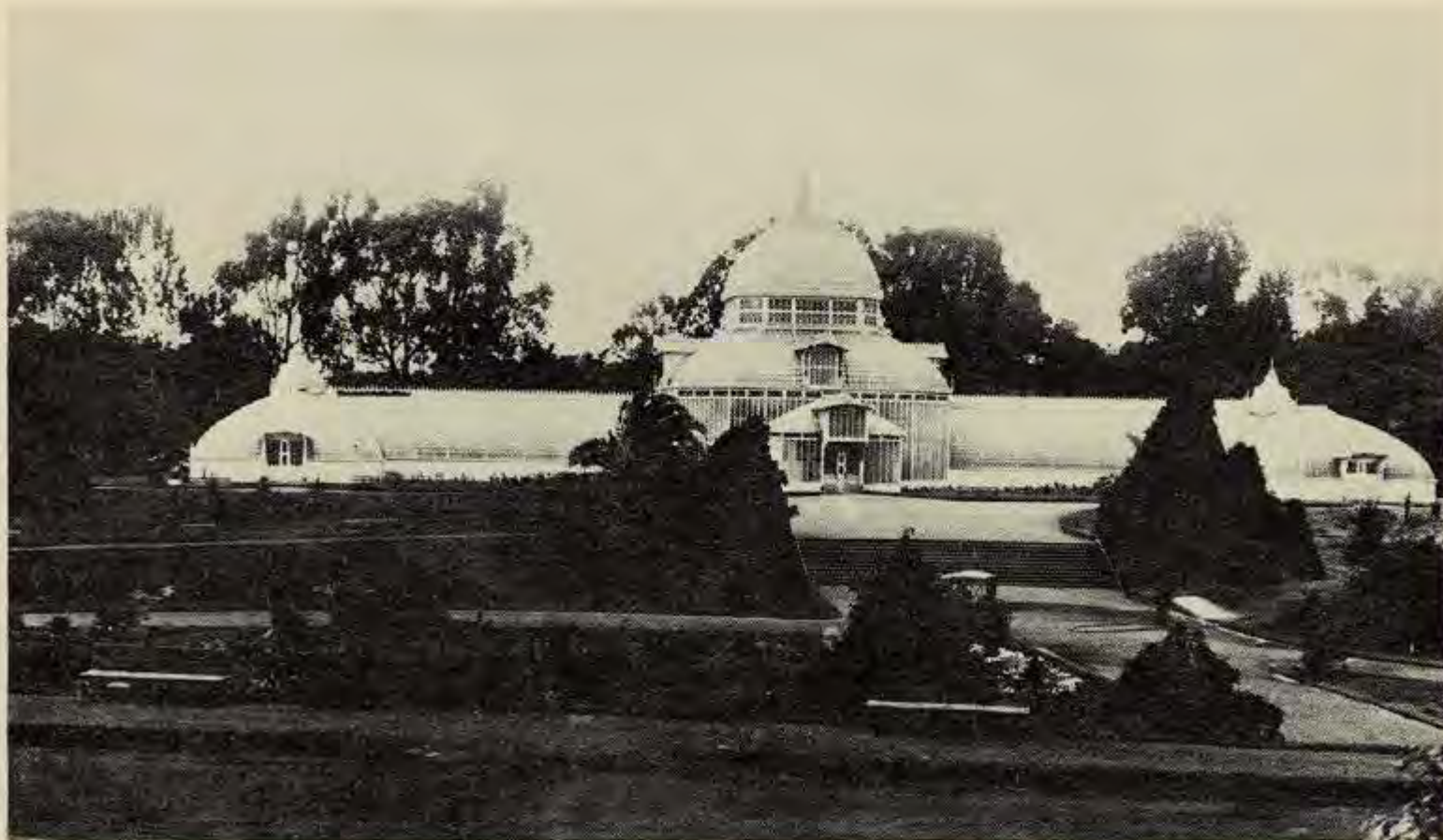
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*During its early years, the Conservatory of Flowers was the focal point of a Sunday visit to Golden Gate Park.*