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# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

## 1 NAME

HISTORIC

Forestiere Underground Gardens

AND/OR COMMON

Forestiere Gardens

## 2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

5021 West Shaw Avenue, Fresno, California 93711

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Fresno

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

VICINITY OF Fresno

17th

STATE

California

CODE

COUNTY

Fresno

CODE

## 3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

OWNERSHIP

STATUS

PRESENT USE

DISTRICT

PUBLIC

OCCUPIED

AGRICULTURE

MUSEUM

BUILDING(S)

PRIVATE

UNOCCUPIED

COMMERCIAL

PARK

STRUCTURE

BOTH

WORK IN PROGRESS

EDUCATIONAL

PRIVATE RESIDENCE

SITE

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

ACCESSIBLE

ENTERTAINMENT

RELIGIOUS

OBJECT

IN PROCESS

YES: RESTRICTED

GOVERNMENT

SCIENTIFIC

BEING CONSIDERED

YES: UNRESTRICTED

INDUSTRIAL

TRANSPORTATION

NO

MILITARY

OTHER: Memorial

## 4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Rosario Forestiere

Joseph Forestiere

STREET & NUMBER

629 West Robinwood Lane

CITY, TOWN

Fresno

VICINITY OF

STATE

California

## 5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Fresno County Recorders Office, Hall of Records

STREET & NUMBER

2281 Tulare Street, Room 302

CITY, TOWN

Fresno

STATE

California

## 6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Heritage Fresno (Historic Homes - American Assn. of University Women - Fresno Branch)

DATE

1975

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Published by Pioneer Publishing Co.,

CITY, TOWN

Fresno

STATE

California

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION  
 EXCELLENT  
 GOOD Deteriorated  
 FAIR in parts  
 DETERIORATED  
 RUINS  
 UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE  
 UNALTERED  
 ALTERED

CHECK ONE  
 ORIGINAL SITE  
 MOVED DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Forestiere Underground Gardens in Fresno, California, is in the central San Joaquin Valley, three miles southeast of the San Joaquin River and approximately midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. The underground home and gardens of Baldasare Forestiere are contained in the remaining ten acres (less streets and roads) of an original seventy some odd acre parcel. What remains is basically unaltered and exists in its original form, save for deterioration due to rain, erosian and neglect.

Ravages of time, reverses of fortune and subsequent neglect diminished the scope and size of the Forestiere Gardens over the years. Several blocks of acreage were sold. Yet in spite of these misfortunes, in spite of subsequent encroachments of commercial and industrial developments and the pre-emptions of land for irrigation ditches, streets, easements and freeways, ten acres remain. These contain the original underground home and gardens of Baldasare Forestiere, parts of which were left to fall into a state of disrepair. Photos and descriptions of many of these neglected areas are dated 1923 and earlier.

The Forestiere Underground Gardens is a complex of underground caverns, grottos, patios, and garden courts encircling the underground home of Baldasare Forestiere. They are inter-connected with underground passageways and promenades together with a lengthy auto tunnel (some 800' long) which winds its way through the gardens. These are embellished with planters of various shapes and sizes, many with built-in recessed seats of hardpan, mortar and cement. There are columns, arches and domes of hardpan - a native sedimentary stone that is pervasive to the area. Some ceilings are vaulted and carved like inverted tea cups under the martel of hardpan with a shallow layer of thick heavy topsoil. Others have skylights adorned with redwood arbors and pergolas with cascading grapevines. Over his living areas skylights were made which he covered in the winter with window pane glass to keep out the rain, yet allow in natural lighting. In the planters throughout the gardens a wide variety of trees were planted, some of them rare. Many citrus trees were grafted with a variety of citrus; one tree having some 7 different varieties. Some of the rare trees after almost seventy years still prosper and bear fruit. Varieties that he planted are Almond, Pomegranate, Italian Pear, Bartlett Pear, Olives, Persimmons, Avocado, Loquat, Quince, Carob (St. John's Bread), Jujube (Oriental Date), Arbutus Unedo (Strawberry tree), Black Fig, Tangrine, Grapefruit, Sweet and Sour Orange, Japanica Kumquat, Lemons, Date Palm and Mulberry.

A small fish pond is found in the garden court off the kitchen and bedroom areas which is crossed by a small foot bridge. Also located elsewhere in the gardens is a walk-in and walk-under aquarium. He made a circular glass bottom through which tropical fish could be observed. On ground level there was a small lake of which only a few remants remain. Vanishing traces can only faintly be detected, which instead of being enlarged as contemplated, was filled in by tennants for the present parking lot.

The underground home and gardens were designed and sculpted with hand tools by Baldasare Forestiere, a Sicilian immigrant who in the early part of the century

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in his spare time as a vineyardist and horticulturist found sufficient time to devote to such a remarkable and extra-ordinary undertaking.

"Beneath the well cultivated acres of his ranch...working alone in his spare time...Forestiere excavated fifty rooms connected with passageways ...rooms are skylighted...clusters of big yellow lemons and grapefruit and orange blossoms...vines spread upward and outward forming a green roof from which clusters of grapes hang...A great tunnel has been excavated for automobile traffic...a glass bottom fishbowl room...a small lake is already in existence and will be enlarged to cover a great extent of the establishment...leading into the center of the lake will be a tunnel from the underground workings which will allow visitors to ascend from the depths and enjoy boating and other aquatic sports...near one of the deeper caverns there is a gasoline engine that operates the pump...there are ten acres with several stories down...A sight worth seeing...it will in years to come be one of the show places of the west..." (Fresno Bee, 1923-24).

Baldasare Forestiere continued with his creations for yet another 23-24 years, after the above descriptions were written. He died in 1946 at the age of 67. His desire to be laid to rest at the Gardens was never fulfilled. He was buried instead at Holy Cross Cemetery, some five miles south of the Gardens.

# ⑧ SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-1946	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY) Unique Conceptual Processes
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

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SPECIFIC DATES 1906-1946

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Baldasare Forestiere

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Forestiere Underground Gardens in Central San Joaquin Valley, in California is widely recognized for its originality and uniqueness. Visitors from across the country and overseas declare that there is nothing quite like it. Architects have attempted to identify it as "Terra-ecture". (Science Digest - #1/1975). Yet artists have described it as "Terra-sculpture" a form of walk-in and walk-around sculpture. There is a blending of these two conceptual thought processes for which newly coined words do not adequately portray their significance. The Underground Gardens are merged and blended into a unique variety of combinations.

Settling on the semi-desert land, baked and scorched by the summer sun, Baldasare Forestiere began in the early 1900's to carve and sculpt a thoroughly unique underground retreat to escape the excessive heat. After nearly forty years with hand tools and persistent effort, he succeeded in creating a cool subterranean complex, a piece of the old mediterranean world fashioned after the "visions stored in my mind". (Fresno Bee 5/23/24).

To avoid monotony and a barren appearance, these sculptings and creations are complimented with novel landscapes and unique horticultural experiments..."everywhere there are arches and domed ceilings and windows with lovely views and pleasing vistas" (Heritage Fresno). They reveal explorations with the control of growth through the controlling of sunlight and root systems. Trees with a variety of citrus on a single tree attest to his experiments with grafting, budding and propagating techniques. Some trees over sixty some-odd years still exist. One tree, some twenty-two feet below ground surface has eight grafts of citrus, of which seven still flourish and bear fruit today.

By coming to an understanding with his environment, he was able to modify it. The extremes in temperature (from the low 20's to 115 plus degrees) was almost more than one accustomed to a mediterranean frost-free climate could endure. A severe and semi-desert environment was moderated and made more temperate. By creating varying micro-climates throughout his underground home and gardens, a dramatic transformation soon resulted. "the fruit hangs almost twice as long...frost never touches this region...the temperature seldom changes over ten degrees the year round". (The Fresno Bee 3/23/23).

Acting as his own designer and engineer, Baldasare Forestiere used his knowledge and ability with amazing skill and craftsmanship. He designed just right for light and ventilation, strength and durability. To support the great mass of earth and to

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Statement of significance, continued

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give permanence to his earthen sculptings, he used the ancient Roman arch, column and dome. Hardpan, mortar and cement were used not only for structural purposes, but for textural variety and beautification. Being his own architect, he did not require a blueprint. He chose instead to follow his own creative instincts and aesthetic impulses. "No plans were made. Every detail in the development of the underground gardens has originated in the brain of Forestiere and has never been set on paper. Gradually he has evolved a comprehensive scheme that will connect up into one of the most involved and yet delightful labyrinths of modern ages" (Fresno Bee, 3/23/23).

The Underground Gardens stand as a testament to the spirit of individualism and the uniqueness of man. They are physical extensions and representations of unique mental concepts. Novel explorations in the control of space and form, the controlling of light and air. The control of and creating of various climates in days before electricity and air-conditioning were available to him. By explorations in the harmony and contrast of textures and materials, creative expressions evoke ever-changing moods and feelings with the varied changes in the physical surroundings..."Variety and originality of design are the predominating impressions left in the mind of the sight-seer. In no two of the reception rooms is an idea repeated. In no place does the working out of the idea of the builder reach the monotonous. A fertile mind filled with ideas is expressed in every turn of the twisting tunnels! (Fresno Bee 3/23/23). One is constantly made aware of the multi-faceted personality of its creator. An imprint of a totally sincere and unpretentious life without tinsel and artificiality.

In the days before power tools and earth moving machinery, such determination and perseverance is a tribute to an indomitable spirit. It is all the more amazing that "with simple hand tools as a pick, a shovel and a wheelbarrow and an incredible amount of hard work, Baldasare Forestiere...created a lush mediterranean setting around his home". (Treasures of America). Forestiere's life and work is a memorial to one who came to terms with a hostile environment and created a life of compatibility and harmony with nature and mother earth.



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Major Bibliographical References

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- ✓ Wampler, Jan, Baldasare Forestiere, Architecture Plus, July/August 1974.
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Resource Persons:

Wampler, Jan, Master of Architecture degree, Harvard Graduate School of Design,  
Associate Professor Architect and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technol-  
ogy, Boston, Massachusetts, and a practicing architect.