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Homay King

Sarah Winchester: Silicon Valley Developer

In San Jose, California, sits a sprawling mansion known as the Winchester Mystery House. The property is about fifty miles south of San Francisco, near the Junipero Serra Freeway, on the street now called Winchester Boulevard and was owned and expanded by Sarah Lockwood Winchester. By reframing both the Winchester Mystery House and the woman who developed it, this essay demonstrates that present-day computational personhood is informed by histories far more varied and nuanced than previously appreciated.

Sarah Winchester was heiress to the fortune of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, which was once one of the world's largest manufacturers of guns. Winchester rifles were known in particular for their pioneering designs in automatic and semi-automatic weapons, the predecessors of today's magazine guns.¹ After enduring the deaths of her infant daughter Annie to a congenital defect and her husband William to tuberculosis, Sarah Winchester left the rifle company and her life in New Haven, Connecticut, and decamped to California, settling in the region that would later become Silicon Valley. In 1884, she bought a Victorian farmhouse and named it Llanada Villa, a misspelling of the Spanish for "home on the plains." She continued to renovate and expand this house for almost forty years, until her death in 1922. Her home was under near constant construction, with carpenters sometimes working twenty-four hours a day.

As was not unusual at the time, Winchester reportedly consulted a psy-

1 The Volcanic repeating firearm, in which Oliver Winchester invested, has been called "the parent of all-American magazine guns." Pamela Haag, *The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 56.

Homay King, "Sarah Winchester: Silicon Valley Developer," *JCMS* 61, no. 4 (Summer 2022): 188–194.

chic following the losses of her husband and daughter.² According to legend, the medium warned Winchester that the spirits of those killed by Winchester rifles had cursed her family. While sold all over the world, including to foreign armies, the rifles enjoyed their greatest success as domestic weapons marketed to civilian settlers: the Winchester '73, immortalized in the 1950 film of that name starring James Stewart, was famously dubbed “the gun that won the West” and was responsible for the slaughter of untold numbers of both Native Americans and settlers during the Manifest Destiny era of westward expansion. The Blackfoot warriors of Montana called the Winchester Repeating Rifle “the spirit gun” for its capacity to reload itself automatically.³ The psychic predicted that the spirits of those slain would continue to haunt Winchester unless she moved to California and built a gigantic dwelling for them. This structure, Winchester was advised, should be colossal in size but also rigged with trapdoors, winding staircases, doors to nowhere, and other maze-like features so that the spirits would be tricked and unable to harm her: it was to be a ghost trap. The result was, in one critic’s words, “a four-story jumble of mansards, turrets, gables, gingerbread tracery, and board and batten siding.”⁴ At the time of her death, Winchester’s house boasted 161 rooms, forty-seven fireplaces, over 10,000 panes of glass, and three elevators.

The Winchester House—California State Historical Landmark no. 868—is currently privately owned and operated as a tourist attraction. Its promotional materials play to the property’s Gothic, haunted house associations. They paint Winchester as a lonely eccentric who held séances in a private octagonal room constructed for this purpose, where she supposedly received messages from the dead with architectural blueprints for the home. According to this literature, Winchester’s superstitious nature prompted her to configure ornaments, coat hooks, and other decorative details in groups of thirteen as a kind of numeric talisman. Accounts from tourist materials also note that she rarely if ever appeared in public.⁵

But some, including Winchester’s biographer, Mary Jo Ignoffo, claim that the story of her obsessional attempts to exorcise her ghosts is at least partly a myth. While most accounts agree that Winchester did indeed visit a Boston spiritualist after the deaths of her child and husband, that

2 “In *Prominent American Ghosts* (1967), Susy Smith names a Boston medium that Sarah Winchester supposedly consulted, Adam Coons. The story and the medium’s name have been repeated since then in a variety of articles and brochures. An examination of Boston city directories from that time reveals a list of spiritualists, but none by the name Smith gives.” Mary Jo Ignoffo, *Captive of the Labyrinth: Sarah L. Winchester, Heiress to the Rifle Fortune* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 80. I am grateful to Ignoffo and rely heavily on her biography of Sarah Winchester for factual information throughout this essay.

3 Laura Trevelyan, *The Winchester: The Gun That Built an American Dynasty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 39–40.

4 Cited in Mitchell Schwarzer, “How the West Was Won,” in *Jeremy Blake: Winchester*, by Mitchell Schwarzer and Benjamin Weil (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 65.

5 Tour of the Winchester Mystery House by the author, August 25, 2016. For additional primary sources, see Keith R. Kittle, *The Winchester Mystery House* (San Jose, CA: Winchester Mystery House, 1997); and Ralph Rambo, *Lady of Mystery (Sarah Winchester)* (San Jose, CA: Rosicrucian Press, 1967). As a secondary source, see Christine R. Junker, “Unruly Women and Their Crazy Houses,” *Home Cultures: The Journal of Architecture, Design and Domestic Space* 12, no. 3 (2015): 329–346.

she did an inordinate amount of construction on her San Jose home, and that she was indeed a recluse, there are more mundane explanations for these aspects of her biography. Winchester was only four feet ten, intensely arthritic, and had difficulty walking. Her decision to settle in the more clement environment of California was at least partly motivated by health concerns.⁶ She personally ordered the stairs in her home to be built at a height of an inch or two per step; in order to fit the space, they had to zigzag rather than ascend in straight lines. They were constructed in this manner to accommodate her disability, not to fool malevolent spirits.⁷ The blind windows and doorways are at least partly remnants of the destruction wrought by the 1906 earthquake; rather than repair the damaged parts of the house, Winchester simply had them boarded up and built new rooms on the other side of the property. The seemingly interminable carpentry, too, was at least partly attributable to earthquake damage. The appearances of the number 13 were in some instances arbitrary and in others probably added after her death as set dressing for the tourists. Finally, her reclusiveness can be attributed to her chronic health issues and can also be explained by her status as a wealthy widow from New England who might understandably be deemed peculiar by the local population, which at that time consisted largely of migrant agricultural workers.

Casting yet more doubt on the Sarah Winchester myth is the fact that she owned over a dozen properties throughout the San Francisco Bay Area in addition to the mysterious San Jose house. One of these was a large tract of orchard and ranch land that would later become the city of Los Altos and the Rancho San Antonio Open Space Preserve. Winchester faced a long court battle when she refused a request for an easement to build a railroad line through this parcel. She lost the case, the rail line was built, and she was compensated \$30,000 for her trouble. This route would later become Foothill Expressway, a major north–south thoroughfare that connects the city of San Jose to Stanford University. She also preemptively purchased a parcel adjacent to hers when it was rumored that an investor was planning to open a saloon there.⁸

Winchester owned two houses in the city of Atherton, which was already on its way to becoming an enclave for the very wealthy. Her first Atherton home bore no resemblance to the rambling Victorian. It was a Mission Revival, ranch-style structure with a stucco exterior and Arts and Crafts movement interiors, typical of the region.⁹ Winchester also owned a tract of shoreland on the San Francisco Bay, which housed a Tudor-style cottage. She kept a houseboat there, known as Sarah's Ark, a name that suggests survivalist religious notions. Houseboating, with its cooler temperatures and proximity to the water, was a chic way to spend the summer at the time. Her valuable plot of bayside land now encompasses the entire city of Burlingame, including the San Francisco International Airport. Some of Winchester's properties, including houses in

6 Ignoffo, *Captive of the Labyrinth*, 84–85.

7 Trevalyan, *Winchester*, 136.

8 Rambo, *Lady of Mystery*, 14.

9 Ignoffo, *Captive of the Labyrinth*, 181.

Palo Alto and San Jose, were rentals. With the help of a lawyer who had been an affiliate of her husband, Winchester managed all of these assets with great business acumen, acquiring hundreds of acres. It is not an exaggeration to say that she owned a large percentage of what is now the San Francisco Peninsula and Silicon Valley, today's equivalent of hundreds of billions of dollars. She owned approximately 2,800 shares of Winchester stock, a majority share, the dividends of which would have given her an annual income of approximately \$150,000 in 1880s dollars, or \$3.9 million in 2022.¹⁰

Winchester, in other words, was perhaps less a mystical madwoman than a savvy business tycoon, driven as much by capitalist ambition as by the melancholia of her personal losses, or guilt over the slaughter of Indigenous Americans. Her real estate acquisitions were economically strategic—not convincingly explicable as pure acts of symbolic atonement or reparation. In some ways, they appear to be nearly the opposite: a continuation, not an undoing, of settler colonialism. Rebecca Solnit mentions Sarah Winchester briefly in *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, and while Solnit accepts the mythical version of the tale, she does note that “the house came to seem like the emigrant West itself in its insatiable desire for expansion.”¹¹ While Winchester retained several homes for her own residence, her real estate purchases were primarily investments; they generated income from rentals, ranching, and fruit-growing. She blocked others from acquiring land adjacent to hers. As her mechanic Fred Larsen observed, “She wasn't crazy . . . she was a plenty smart woman.”¹²

The few charitable projects Winchester undertook did not benefit First Nations peoples or veterans or survivors of gun violence. They included a hospital for the tubercular in New Haven that was a memorial to her late husband and a donation to a fund to preserve the California Redwoods. Sarah Winchester came from a progressive New England family whose members advocated for abolitionism, suffrage, and animal rights; they included the founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.¹³ Spiritualism, in turn, has been described as a socially progressive feminist movement that rejected racial inequality, killing, and colonialism and that criticized “groveling materialism.”¹⁴ Winchester, though, did not take a public stance on any of these causes or make any known contributions to them.¹⁵

Sarah Winchester was not so much possessed as possessing. Still, she was more complex than the average Gilded Age tycoon. Her home boasted many high-tech amenities that were uncommon at the time, such as push-button gas lighting, modern plumbing, insulation made of wool, and a hydraulic elevator. These minor engineering innovations speak to an ingenuity that would come to be associated with Silicon Valley many decades later. Winchester personally designed many of the architectural features in her home, includ-

10 Rambo, *Lady of Mystery*, 14.

11 Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003), 117.

12 Quoted in Trevelyan, *Winchester*, 125.

13 Haag, *Gunning of America*, 85.

14 Haag, xxiv.

15 Ignoffo, *Captive of the Labyrinth*, 17.

ing the staircases that accommodated her arthritis. Other features of the Mystery House, too, testify to a fusion of luxury and technical ingenuity. She designed an indoor plant conservatory with a canted floor and wood panels that could be removed to allow water run-off to drain into the garden below, thereby conserving water and minimizing labor while still preserving the greenhouse's Victorian aesthetic in the drought-prone region. She created a prototype for a laundry sink with a molded-in scrubbing rack and designed a custom shower made of pipes with pinholes installed at the height exactly below her neck, so that she could bathe without wetting her hair. Her window catches, which she also personally designed, used a spring closure adapted from the loading mechanism of the Winchester automatic rifle, anticipating the way that technologies developed by the military-industrial complex are adapted into consumer products today.

The tourist literature also makes much of Winchester's generous treatment of her employees, most of whom were immigrants from China, Japan, Ireland, and Italy. She was on close terms with many of them; five were bequeathed small sums in her will. But Sarah was also suspicious enough that she had interior skylights installed in strategic locations so that she could monitor her staff from above. These windows allowed in light and warmth and were thus energy efficient, but they also allowed for optical control and surveillance of her employees. The Mystery House also had a primitive intercom system known as the Annunciator, essentially a network of pipes through which Sarah could speak to her staff from other rooms. These panopticon-like features positioned Winchester as the disembodied eye and voice of the house.

In the decades after her death, the lots adjacent to Winchester's property were rapidly developed by private corporations. Across Winchester Boulevard, a Town & Country drive-in shopping center designed by Jeré Strizek arrived in 1960, notable for its single-level structures with Spanish-tile roofs and abundant parking.¹⁶ The Town & Country franchise had been launched in the 1940s when the notion of a drive-in shopping experience was still novel: today, one would simply call this a strip mall. In the mid-1960s, iconic domed movie theaters were built in the lot directly adjacent to the Mystery House, designed by Vincent Raney. The first of these, Century 21, was built in 1964 with a giant curved screen for the three-strip Cinerama format. Its neighbor, Century 22, arrived in 1966 and showed films in Super Panavision 70 and accommodated nearly two thousand spectators. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Century 22 would regularly sell out screenings of blockbuster films. The third dome to be built, Century 23, was a two-screen theater completed in 1967. As of September 2019, there was an active campaign to preserve the original dome as historically significant architecture, but its fate is not entirely certain.¹⁷

Diagonally across from these theaters sits a large indoor mall that opened in 1986. Currently known as Westfield Valley Fair, it was owned by the Hahn

16 For more on the history of Town & Country drive-in shopping malls, see Julie Albert, "Town & Country Shopping Center Was First of Its Kind," *Columbus Dispatch*, February 24, 2013.

17 Save the Domes Facebook group, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/savedome/>.

Group, a major corporate developer responsible for forty-five similar indoor malls from coast to coast. A newer development now sits on the site of the Town & Country strip mall, which was demolished in 2003. Named Santana Row, it was built by the Executive Home Builders firm, known for its properties in Las Vegas. Santana Row is a mixed-use complex featuring residential and office rental units, commercial storefronts, and outdoor pedestrian areas designed to simulate a European town. The mall features piped-in music, which is audible while strolling through the outdoor areas; illuminated fountains; and pastel-painted façades with decorative metalwork. It is a highly controlled and meticulously curated environment similar to the Grove in Los Angeles and the Americana in nearby Glendale. One of its current tenants, visible from the Mystery House, is the data-mining company Splunk.

All of this suburban development suggests that, in a curious way, the spirit of Sarah Winchester's enterprise continued after her death. She was prescient, and she was indeed a visionary and an eccentric—but in different ways than the legend tells. She was a venture capitalist in Victorian crinolines, a titan of real estate masquerading as a diminutive widow. Her story bears retelling, and my version of it is meant to complicate existing understandings of the origins of Silicon Valley and contemporary tech culture. The fusion of acquisitiveness and mysticism that she so perfectly crystallizes is related to what Fred Turner calls the Californian Ideology: a blend of “libertarian politics, countercultural aesthetics, and techno-utopian visions.”¹⁸ Her worldview combined greed and invention with an imagination given to woo-woo spiritual thinking and grandiose fantasies of reparation. Her séances, superstitions, and divination practices were not merely an idiosyncratic obsession or pastime; they were intimately entwined with her real estate speculations and business ventures. The territory she acquired throughout the Bay Area would later become the tech industry center of the world. A prefiguration of the iconic figures of the tech CEO with quirky New Age affectations, Winchester portended Silicon Valley's paradoxical future. Her home is thus both a symptom of nineteenth-century historical trauma and a harbinger of its irresolute persistence into the twenty-first century.

Homay King is a professor of history of art at Bryn Mawr College. She is the author of *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier* (2010) and *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (2015), both from Duke University Press.

18 Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 208. Turner takes this term from Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, who described *Wired* magazine as a purveyor of “the Californian Ideology.” Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, “The Californian Ideology,” accessed January 15, 2022, <http://www.imaginaryfutures.net/2007/04/17/the-californian-ideology-2/>. Turner traces this ideology to the Whole Earth Network. In the book project from which this essay is drawn, I trace it to California's colonial eras. For further reading on the history of Silicon Valley, see Margaret O'Mara, *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (New York: Penguin, 2019).